In 2003, United States forces bombed the National Film Archives in Iraq, obliterating its collection of celluloid almost completely. A journalist came through the archives and discovered 8 remnants of celluloid, which amounted to 14.3 seconds of film. This destruction is a physical manifestation of how the Iraqi film industry contracted and nearly vanished under the regime of Saddam Hussein and as a result of wars with Iran, Kuwait and the United States.

Yet within a dangerous and difficult environment, a nascent film industry has begun to reemerge, complete with passionate and skilled filmmakers and other film professionals devoted to reclaiming Iraq’s cinematic culture. Despite the country’s risky security situation, particularly from 2003 to 2007, multiple filmmakers have endeavored to tell Iraqi stories, to rebuild Iraqi culture, and to participate in the global film industry. Many of these filmmakers are exiles or part of the Iraqi diaspora, and these individuals work to draw attention to the burgeoning filmmaking movement within their native country.

A consideration of independent film in the Iraqi context requires an understanding of the full picture of filmmaking in the country. To many working Iraqi filmmakers today, the articulation of independent versus dependent filmmaking is a moot point, given the condition of the industry today. Independent film is the only one that exists.

Iraqi cinema has had business relationships with a number of institutions (including Egyptian film studios, governmental cultural agencies and Hollywood) that have, alternatively, contributed to and detracted from its development. Filmmakers operating outside of these institutions have shaped the Iraqi film industry nearly as equally. With so little consistent support from any one source as to constitute a dominant institution, Iraqi filmmakers generally have had to cobble together resources wherever and from whomever they have been able; they often work with funding sources from Europe (e.g., France’s World Cinema Fund, the Dutch embassy or the UK Film Council) or the Middle East (e.g., Al Jazeera or the Al Sumaria satellite television network in Iraq). As a result, the nature of Iraqi cinema can be characterized historically as one of transnationality. Certainly, characteristics of Iraqi cinema today reflect an internationally collaborative dynamism that permits its growth. We see these characteristics in modes of production, distribution and marketing, and exhibition.

This chapter explores the conditions and realities of filmmaking in Iraq and for Iraqis in a country marked by war, occupation, infrastructural collapse, and cultural stifling. It focuses on the nature of filmmaking in Iraq, the conditions under which filmmaking is happening roughly ten years after the start of the war, and some of the individuals creating and supporting the national film industry. This requires an understanding of the history of Iraqi cinema, from the early days of exhibition-only exposure to filmmaking to a so-called Golden Age starting in the mid-1940s to the repressive and propagandistic influence on cinema during Saddam Hussein’s reign. I will then turn to the contemporary era, describing the climate of filmmaking at the start of the war in 2003 and the development of current infrastructures and resources for filmmakers.
At the core of this research are questions relating to how cinema develops and survives, the role of exiled filmmakers – and the global film community – in sustaining that cinema, and ultimately how culture endures despite repression and destruction.