

**From “Inhuman” to “Humane”:
Soft Power at the Zoo and the U.S. Army CERP Program in Iraq**

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In 2003, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Baghdad zoo was nearly destroyed. Used as a military outpost, its walls were pocked with mortar shells, its animals dead or escaped, and most of its infrastructure gone. Only 35 of 500 animals survived. Looters stole parrots for the black market, grabbed animals for meat, and let others loose in the city where an escaped giraffe was roaming. By 2009, things had changed dramatically, and the rebuilt zoo captured extensive international attention in the civil and military press in the U.S. and abroad, including *Al Jazeera*. Now an oasis of safety and leisure in the still war-torn city, this transformation of an urban landscape from war zone to leisure zone now hosts more than five million visitors annually, and 10,000 each weekend, mainly Iraqi families. Attendance is up 300% since 2007.

This paper investigates the question of why the zoo—as physical site and social institution-- has figured so prominently among the stories of “rebuilding” Iraq, and how that rebuilding seeks to transform the rupture of military occupation into cultural commonality. Especially pertinent is the role of the U.S. Army CERP program (Commanders’ Emergency Response Program), and the 15th Brigade Support Battalion, which deploys money and troops for humanitarian initiatives, has been so involved in rebuilding the zoo. U.S. soldiers have been reported feeding their own rations to the starving zoo animals, killing marauding lions, building stables, and providing security patrols. U.S. zoos have donated animals and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Analyzing public discourse in the form of U.S. and international news reports, YouTube videos, U.S. soldiers’ blogs, U.S. Armed Forces statements, and so on, I will suggest that zoos, as a marker of urban civic institutions, stand for “progress” in rebuilding, and can carry a special symbolic weight in marking those who care for animals as “humane” and not “inhuman.” In a partnership between military action and capitalist opportunism, the Zoo and neighboring al-Zawra park are now slated for further development into a massive entertainment complex by a Los Angeles-based holding company and the firm that developed Disneyland. This notion of “civic healing through leisure capitalism” is one symbolic mode of promoting a shift from discourses of military rupture to civic connection.