

# 66 a missile nearly killed me on my way home from school 99

Asra'a Mizyad, 17, was badly injured when her village in Iraq was attacked. Now she's speaking out for victims like her. AS TOLD TO HOLLY AGUIRRE

The village of Abu Floos, Iraq, where Asra'a Mizyad lives with her parents and two brothers, was once a flourishing port village near Basra, the second-biggest city in Iraq. As recently as nine years ago, Abu Floos, located three hours south of Baghdad, was thought to be safe. But today, after years of conflicts involving Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, and the U.S. and its allied forces, Asra'a's family and the other thousand or so village residents live in poverty. Back in 1990, the year Asra'a was born, Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, invaded neighboring Kuwait. President George Bush, Sr., sent U.S. troops to try to free Kuwait, launching an air strike against Iraq called Desert Storm. Saddam agreed to a cease-fire in April 1991. In the agreement, no-fly zones were created—areas that both sides agreed had no military significance and therefore were considered safe. Abu Floos was

one of those areas. So in December 1998, when President Bill Clinton ordered an air strike against Iraq called Operation Desert Fox in response to a dispute over military inspections for nuclear weapons, residents of the town weren't too alarmed—they thought their no-fly-zone status protected them. Then everything changed. Here is Asra'a's story.

## FATEFUL DAY

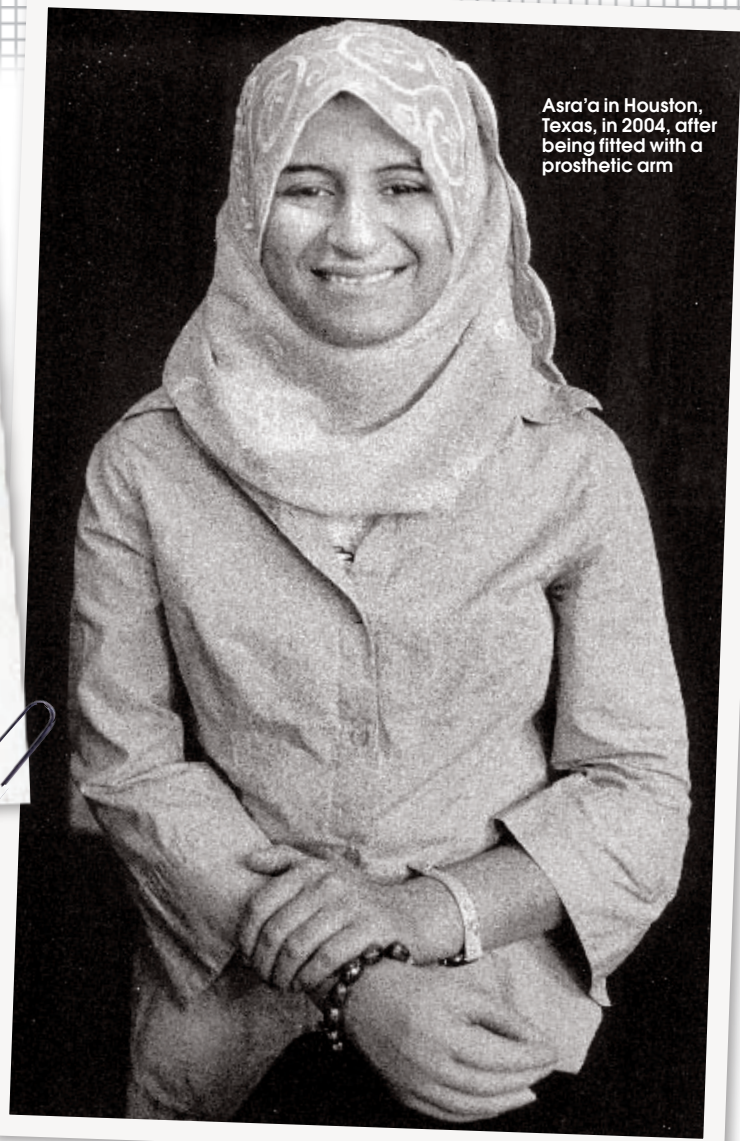
On January 25, 1999, about a month after Desert Fox began, I was walking home from my elementary school at 10 a.m.—we had exams that morning and were let out early. When I was two blocks from my house, I heard an incredibly loud explosion. Total chaos broke out—people started screaming and running. The pressure of the blast threw me to the ground, and I felt some-

thing warm running over me. Then I must have fallen unconscious. The next thing I remembered was waking up in the hospital 10 days later.

## GETTING THE TRUTH

When I came to, I saw there were cuts and stitches all over me. But most shockingly, my right arm was gone! The doctors told me that shrapnel from the blast had ripped through my body, and my arm had been so mangled that amputating it had been the only way to save my life. I had also suffered numerous internal injuries, like a collapsed lung and damage to my other organs. I'll have a piece of metal lodged in my

head for the rest of my life because removing it would kill me. My parents and doctors tried to explain what happened: The U.S. military had launched a missile over my village; they soon admitted to American newspapers that this was an error. Buildings were destroyed, 7 people died, and 14 others were hurt. I wondered, Why would anyone bomb my peaceful village? I had to stay in the hospital for five months, and my parents sold most of our possessions just to pay my medical costs. The U.S. government offered no support—at the time, they didn't have a policy that said they had to. Then,



Asra'a in Houston, Texas, in 2004, after being fitted with a prosthetic arm



Asra'a with her dad and Dr. Ted Mullenburg (above), and getting used to her new arm (below)

.5 MILLION CIVILIAN CASUALTIES AND COUNTING...



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www.NoMoreVictims.org  
A bomb dropped by a U.S. plane south of Basra, Iraq, blew off this little girl's arm.

The antiwar poster that made Asra'a an icon



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just when I thought things couldn't get worse, doctors broke the news that my reproductive organs were damaged too—I'd never be able to have kids. In our culture, women are traditionally revered for their ability to give life. Because I now can't, I'll forever be seen as "damaged goods." At only 8 years old, my life as I'd envisioned it was over.

## GIFT OF A LIFETIME

In 2001, when I was 11, my family was boarding a bus in Basra, and I saw a man who was coming off the bus look at what was left of my arm. He had a sad look in his eyes, and he took two pictures of me as our bus pulled away. I never thought I'd see him again. But a year later, some boys from my town showed

up at my house with the same man and a translator. His name was Alan Pogue and he explained that he was an American photographer and war veteran who had been in Iraq the previous year with a group called Veterans for Peace. He showed my family the picture he'd taken of me—it was on a poster with an antiwar message that he and a fellow activist, Cole Miller, had made. I was shocked, but once he assured us that he was searching for me so he could help me get a prosthetic arm, we listened to what he had to say.

In January 2003, Alan and Cole began extensive paperwork to bring me to the U.S.—in addition to the prosthetic arm, I needed X-rays and an operation

to remove some shrapnel in my body that the Iraqi hospitals had not been able to. When some people in my village heard Americans were coming to help me, they said they wished a missile would injure them so they'd get help too. That made me so sad because I'd do anything to have my arm back. Anyway, I was issued an Iraqi passport in March 2003. But the next day, the Iraq War began and we weren't allowed to leave. It was another year before my father and I were able to travel to Houston, Texas, where doctors at the Shriners Hospital operated on me and fitted me with a prosthetic arm, free of charge. Cole invited us to a peace rally in his hometown of Santa Monica, California,

and to see Catalina Island. I remember thinking that everything was so green and wondering if Abu Floos once looked like that. A reception was held for me, and I met American girls my age—they were so sympathetic and kind. My dad and I were showered with gifts, and a few weeks later, we returned to Iraq with 10 suitcases filled with clothes and supplies. I couldn't believe how generous some Americans are.

## FINDING PEACE

People ask if I hate America after what happened—but my parents taught me not to hold anger in my heart, so I have let go of my bad feelings. I know not all Americans are responsible for my injuries, and I've met many who care about the victims of war. For instance, Cole and Alan have established a charity, No More Victims, to provide other child victims of war with the medical treatment they need.

That poster of me has by now been seen all over the world. It was used this year at peace rallies in America and plastered on telephone poles on Sunset Boulevard. I never expected to become this iconic image. But now, at 17, I'm glad I have. I love my country and pray for a peaceful Iraq. I believe education is the key to helping our countries embrace each others' differences. That's why I hope to go to a university in America and become a professor someday.

Telling my story is a safety risk for my family and me, but I'm speaking out in hopes that it will help kids less lucky than me who've been injured and left behind. **U**

For how to help, visit [nomorevictims.org](http://nomorevictims.org).

PHOTOS: ALAN POGUE