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**Blogue: a literatura
multifacetada e multimedial**

Anexo

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Corpus impresso ao blogue

Baghdad Burning

(01/2006 – 12/2006)

Wednesday, January 04, 2006

2006...

Here we are in the first days of 2006. What does the '6' symbolize? How about- 6 hours of no electricity for every one hour of electricity? Or... 6 hours of waiting in line for gasoline that is three times as expensive as it was in 2005? Or an average of six explosions per day near our area alone?

The beginning of the new year isn't a promising one. Prices seem to have shot up on everything from fuels like kerosene and cooking gas, to tomatoes. A typical conversation with Abu Ammar our local fruit/vegetable vendor goes something like this:

R: "Oh nice lemons today Abu Ammar... give us a kilo."

Abu A: "They are Syrian. You should see the tomatoes- if you think these are nice, take a look at those."

R: "Hmmm... they do look good. Two kilos of those. How much will that be?"

Abu A: "That will be 3600 dinars."

R (feigning shock and awe): "3600 dinars! What? That is almost double what we paid a week ago... why?"

Abu A (feigning sorrow and regret): "Habibti... you know what my supplier has to go through to bring me these vegetables? The cost of gasoline has gone up! I swear on the life of my mother that I'm only profiting 50 dinars per kilo..."

R: "Your mother is dead, isn't she?"

Abu A: "Yes yes- but you know how valuable the dear woman was to me- may Allah have mercy on her- and on us all! The dogs in the government are going to kill us with these prices..."

R (sighing heavily): “You voted for the dogs last year Abu Ammar...”

Abu A: “Shhh... don’t call them dogs- it’s not proper. Anyway, it’s not their fault- the Americans are making them do it... my Allah curse them and their children...”

R (with eyes rolling) and Abu A (in unison): “... and their children’s children.”

A few days ago, the cousin took me to buy a pack of recordable CDs. The price had gone up a whole dollar, which may seem a pittance to the average American or European, but it must be remembered that many Iraqis make as little as \$100 a month and complete families are expected to survive on that.

“B. why has the price of these lousy CDs gone up so much???” I demanded from the shop owner who is also a friend, “Don’t tell me your supplier has also pushed the prices up on you because of the gasoline shortage?” I asked sarcastically. No- supplies cost the same for him- he has not needed to stock up yet. But this is how he explained it: his car takes 60 liters [sic] of gasoline. It needs to be refueled [sic] every 2-3 days. The official price of gasoline was 50 Iraqi dinars before, so it cost him around 3000 dinars to fill up his car, which was nearly two dollars. Now it costs 9000 Iraqi dinars IF he fills it up at a gas station and not using black market gasoline which will cost him around 15,000 dinars- five times the former price- and this every two to three days. He also has to purchase extra gasoline for the shop generator which needs to be working almost constantly, now that electricity is about four hours daily. “Now how am I supposed to cover that increase in my costs if I don’t sell CDs at a higher price?”

People buy black market gasoline because for many, waiting in line five, six, seven... ten hours isn’t an option. We’ve worked out a sort of agreement amongst 4 or 5 houses

in the neighborhood [sic]. According to a schedule (which is somewhat complicated and involves license plate numbers, number of children per family, etc.), one of us spends the day filling up the car and then the gasoline is distributed between the four or five involved neighbors [sic].

The process of extracting the gasoline from the car itself once it is back at the house was a rather disgusting and unhealthy one up until nearly a year ago. A hose was inserted into the gasoline tank and one of the unlucky neighbors [sic] would suck on it until the first surge of gasoline came flowing out. Now, thanks to both local and Chinese ingenuity, we have miniature gasoline pumps to suck out the gasoline. “The man who invented these,” My cousin once declared emotionally, holding the pump up like a trophy, “deserves a Nobel Prize in... something or another.”

I know for most of the world, highly priced gasoline is a common concern. For Iraqis, it represents how the situation is deteriorating. Gasoline and kerosene were literally cheaper than bottled water prior to the war. It’s incredibly frustrating that while the price of petrol is at a high, one of the worlds leading oil-producing countries isn’t producing enough to cover its own needs.

There is talk of major mismanagement and theft in the Oil Ministry. Chalabi took over several days ago and a friend who works in the ministry says the takeover is a joke. “You know how they used to check our handbags when we first walked into the ministry?” She asked the day after Chalabi crowned himself Oil Emperor, “Now WE

check our handbags after we leave the ministry- you know- to see if Chalabi stole anything.”

I guess the Iraqis who thought the US was going to turn Iraq into another America weren't really far from the mark- we too now enjoy inane leaders, shady elections, a shaky economy, large-scale unemployment and soaring gas prices.

Goodbye 2005- the year of SCIRI, fraudulent elections, secret torture chambers, car bombs, white phosphorous, assassinations, sectarianism and fundamentalism... you will not be missed.

Let us see what 2006 has in store for us.

- posted by river @ 11:32 PM

Thursday, January 12, 2006

Thank You for the Music...

When I first heard about the abduction of Christian Science Monitor journalist Jill Carroll a week ago, I remember feeling regret. It was the same heavy feeling I get every time I hear of another journalist killed or abducted. The same heavy feeling that settles upon most Iraqis, I imagine, when they hear of acquaintances suffering under the current situation.

I read the news as a subtitle on tv. We haven't had an internet connection for several days so I couldn't really read about the details. All I knew was that a journalist had been abducted and that her Iraqi interpreter had been killed. He was shot in cold blood in Al Adil district earlier this month, when they took Jill Carroll... Theysay [sic] he didn't die immediately. It is said he lived long enough to talk to police and then he died.

I found out very recently that the interpreter killed was a good friend- Alan, of Alan's Melody, and I've spent the last two days crying.

Everyone knew him as simply 'Alan', or "Elin" as it is pronounced in Iraqi Arabic. Prior to the war, he owned a music shop in the best area in Baghdad, A'arasat. He sold some Arabic music and instrumental music, but he had his regular customers - those westernized [sic] Iraqis who craved foreign music. For those of us who listened to rock, adult alternative, jazz, etc. he had very few rivals.

He sold bootleg CDs, tapes and DVDs. His shop wasn't just a music shop- it was a haven. Some of my happiest moments were while I was walking out of that shop

carrying CDs and tapes, full of anticipation for the escape the music provided. He had just about everything from Abba to Marilyn Manson. He could provide anything. All you had to do was go to him with the words, "Alan- I heard a great song on the radio... you have to find it!" And he'd sit there, patiently, asking who sang it? You don't know? Ok- was it a man or a woman? Fine. Do you remember any of the words? Chances were that he'd already heard it and even knew some of the lyrics.

During the sanctions, Iraq was virtually cut off from the outside world. We had maybe four or five local tv stations and it was only during the later years that the internet became more popular. Alan was one of those links with the outside world. Walking into Alan's shop was like walking into a sort of transitional other world. Whenever you walked into the store, great music would be blaring from his speakers and he and Mohammed, the guy who worked in his shop, would be arguing over who was better, Joe Satriani or Steve Vai.

He would have the latest Billboard hits posted on a sheet of paper near the door and he'd have compiled a few of his own favorites [sic] on a 'collection' CD. He also went out of his way to get recordings of the latest award shows- Grammys, AMAs, Oscars, etc. You could visit him twice and know that by the third time, he'd have memorized your favorites [sic] and found music you might be interested in.

He was an electrical engineer- but his passion was music. His dream was to be a music producer. He was always full of scorn for the usual boy bands - N'Sync, Backstreet Boys, etc. - but he was always trying to promote an Iraqi boy band he claimed he'd

discovered,"Unknown to No One". "They're great- wallah they have potential." He'd say. E. would answer, "Alan, they're terrible." And Alan, with his usual Iraqi pride would lecture about how they were great, simply because they were Iraqi.

He was a Christian from Basrah and he had a lovely wife who adored him- F. We would tease him about how once he was married and had a family, he'd lose interest in music. It didn't happen. Conversations with Alan continued to revolve around Pink Floyd, Jimmy Hendrix, but they began to include F. his wife, M. his daughter and his little boy. My heart aches for his family- his wife and children...

You could walk into the shop and find no one behind the counter- everyone was in the other room, playing one version or another of FIFA soccer on the Play Station. He collected those old records, or 'vinyls'. The older they were, the better. While he promoted new musical technology, he always said that nothing could beat the sound of [sic] a vintage vinyl.

We went to Alan not just to buy music. It always turned into a social visit. He'd make you sit down, listen to his latest favorite [sic] CD and drink something. Then he'd tell you the latest gossip- he knew it all. He knew where all the parties were, who the best DJs were and who was getting married or divorced. He knew the local gossip and the international gossip, but it was never malicious with Alan. It was always the funny sort.

The most important thing about Alan was that he never let you down. Never. Whatever it was that you wanted, he'd try his hardest to get it. If you became his friend, that didn't

just include music- he was ready to lend a helping hand to those in need, whether it was just to give advice, or listen after a complicated, difficult week.

After the war, the area he had his shop in deteriorated. There were car bombs and shootings and the Badir people took over some of the houses there. People went to A'arasat less and less because it was too dangerous. His shop was closed up more than it was open. He shut it up permanently after getting death threats and a hand grenade through his shop window. His car was carjacked [sic] at some point and he was shot at so he started driving around in his fathers beaten-up old Toyota Cressida with a picture of Sistani on his back window, "To ward off the fanatics..." He winked and grinned.

E. and I would stop by his shop sometimes after the war, before he shut it down. We went in once and found that there was no electricity, and no generator. The shop was dimly lit with some sort of fuel lampand [sic] Alan was sitting behind the counter, sorting through CDs. He was ecstatic to see us. There was no way we could listen to music so he and E. sang through some of their favorite [sic] songs, stumbling upon the lyrics and making things up along the way. Then we started listening to various ring tones and swapping the latest jokes of the day. Before we knew it, two hours had slipped by and the world outside was forgotten, an occasional explosion bringing us back to reality.

It hit me then that it wasn't the music that made Alan's shop a haven- somewhere to forget problems and worries- it was Alan himself.

He loved Pink Floyd:

Did you see the frightened ones?

Did you hear the falling bombs?

Did you ever wonder why we

Had to run for shelter when the

Promise of a brave, new world

Unfurled beneath the clear blue sky?

Did you see the frightened ones?

Did you hear the falling bombs?

The flames are all long gone, but the pain lingers on.

Goodbye, blue sky

Goodbye, blue sky.

Goodbye. Goodbye.

(Goodbye Blue Sky - Pink Floyd)

Goodbye Alan...

- posted by river @ 10:05 PM

Wednesday, January 18, 2006

A Tribute to Iraqi Ingenuity...

January 17, 2006 marks the 15th commemoration of the Gulf War in 1991 after Iraq occupied Kuwait (briefly) in 1990. (Or according to American terminology, after Iraq ‘liberated’ Kuwait in 1990.)

For 42 days, Baghdad and other cities and towns were bombarded with nearly 140,000 tons of explosives, by international estimates. The bombing was relentless- schools, housing complexes, factories, bridges, electric power stations, ministries, sewage facilities, oil refineries, operators, and even bomb shelters (including the only baby formula factory in Iraq and the infamous Amiryra Shelter bombing where almost 400 civilians were killed).

According to reports and statistics made by the “Iraqi Reconstruction Bureau” and the ministries involved in reconstruction, prior to the 2003 war/occupation, the following damage was done through 42 days of continuous bombing, and various acts of vandalism:

Schools and scholastic facilities – **3960**

Universities, labs, dormitories – **40**

Health facilities (including hospitals, clinics, medical warehouses) – **421**

Telephone operators, communication towers, etc. – **475**

Bridges, buildings, housing complexes – **260**

Warehouses, shopping centers [sic], grain silos – **251**

Churches and mosques – **159**

Dams, water pumping stations, agricultural facilities – **200**

Petroleum facilities (including refineries) – **145**

General services (shelters, sewage treatment plants, municipalities) – **830**

Factories, mines, industrial facilities – **120**

...And much, much more- including radio broadcasting towers, museums, orphanages, retirement homes, etc. While the larger damage- damage to dams, bridges, warehouses, ministries, food silos, etc. - was done by warplanes [sic] and missiles, the damage to smaller facilities was caused largely by vandalism in the south of the country and in areas like Kirkuk. In the south it was mainly the work of the “intifadah” which was initiated by the ‘tawabin’ or “The Repentant” who infiltrated the south from Iran and found supporters inside of the country. (Many of the ‘Tawabin’ are known today as Badir’s Brigade.)

What happened in the south in 1991 is similar to what happened in Baghdad in 2003- burning, looting and attacks. The area fell into chaos after the Republican Guard was pulled out to different governorates [sic] for the duration of the war. Meanwhile, the US was bombing the Iraqi army as it was pulling out of Kuwait and the Tawabin were killing off some of the Iraqi troops who had abandoned their tanks and artillery and were coming back on foot through the south. Many of those troops, and the civilians killed during the attacks, looting, and burning, were buried in some of the mass graves we conveniently blame solely on Saddam and the Republican Guard- but no one bothers to mention this anymore [sic] because it’s easier to blame the dictator.

But I digress- the topic today is reconstruction. Immediately after the war, various ministries were brought together to do the reconstruction work. The focus was on the infrastructure- to bring back the refineries, electricity, water, bridges, and telecommunications.

The task was a daunting one because so many of Iraq's major infrastructure projects and buildings had been designed and built by foreign contractors from all over the world including French, German, Chinese and Japanese companies. The foreign expertise was unavailable after 1991 due to the war and embargo and Iraqi engineers and technicians found themselves facing the devastation of the Gulf War all alone with limited supplies.

Two years and approximately 8 billion Iraqi dinars later, nearly 90% of the damage had been repaired. It took an estimated 6,000 engineers (all Iraqi), 42,000 technicians, and 12,000 administrators, but bridges were soon up again, telephones were more or less functioning in most areas, refineries were working, water was running and electricity wasn't back 100%, but it was certainly better than it is today. Within the first two years over 100 small and large bridges had been reconstructed, 16 refineries, over 50 factories and industrial compounds, etc.




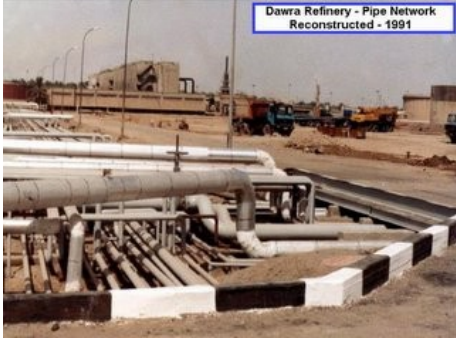
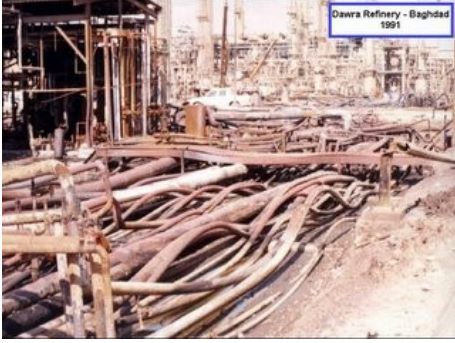

It wasn't perfect- it wasn't Halliburton... It wasn't KBR...but it was Iraqi. There was that sense of satisfaction and pride looking upon a building or bridge that was damaged during the war and seeing it up and running and looking better than it did before.

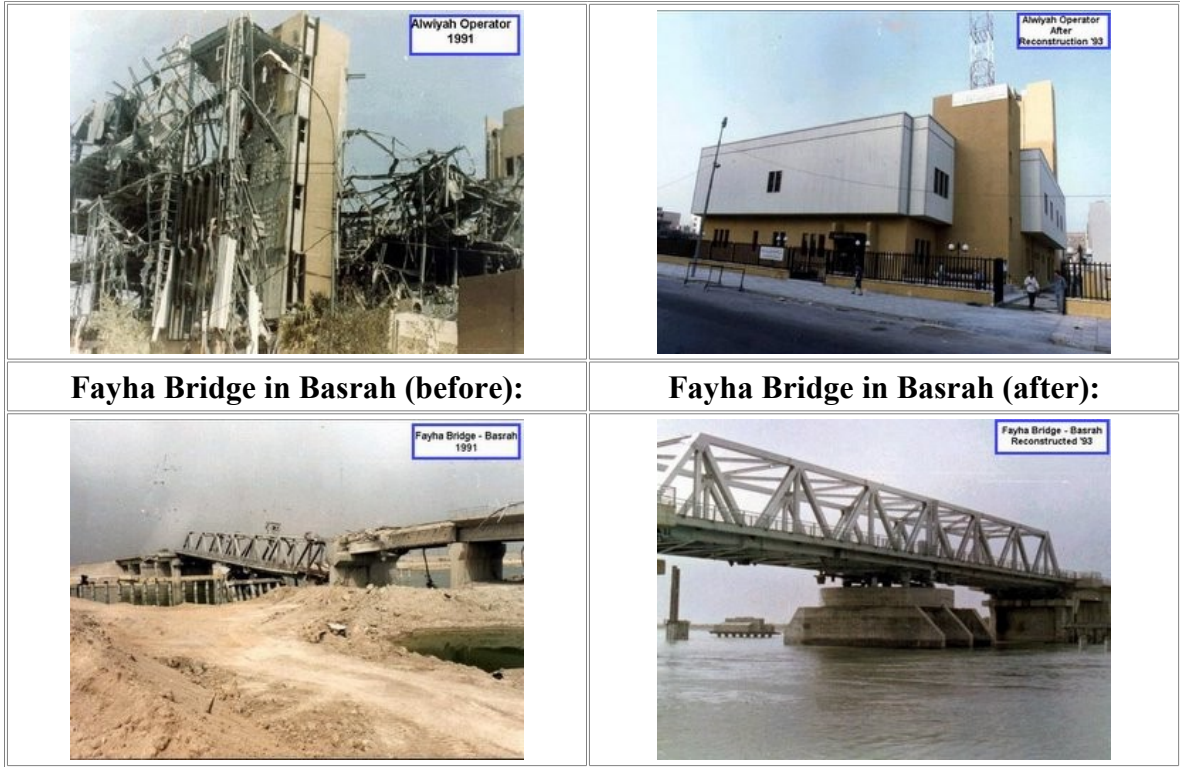
Now, nearly three years after this war, the buildings are still piles of debris. Electricity is terrible. Water is cut off for days at a time. Telephone lines come and go. Oil production isn't even at pre-war levels... and Iraqis hear about the billions upon billions that come and go. A billion here for security... Five hundred million there for the infrastructure... Millions for voting... Iraq falling into deeper debt... Engineers without jobs simply because they are not a part of this political party or that religious group... And the country still in shambles.

One of the biggest, most complicated and most swiftly executed reconstruction projects was the Dawra Refinery in Baghdad. It is Iraq's oldest refinery and one of its largest. It was bombed several times during the Gulf War and oil production came to a halt. After the war, it is said that the Iraqi government negotiated with an Italian company to reconstruct it but the price requested by the company was extremely high. It was decided then that the reconstruction effort would be completely local and the work began almost immediately. Several months later, during the summer of 1991, when the Italian experts came back to assess the damage, they found that the refinery was functioning.

Below are some pictures that were sent to me by an engineer who was a part of the reconstruction effort and is currently jobless in Amman. The pictures are both painful and inspiring. Fifteen years later and it is difficult to see the damage that was wrought on the country... But the 'after' pictures give me faith that Iraq will rise once more- in spite of occupiers and meddlers.

Note: I was tempted to stamp all the ‘after’ pictures with “AMERICANS DID NOT RECONSTRUCT THIS” as I know that in a month some clueless Republican will send them back to me with the words, “Look at how we reconstructed your country!”.

Dawra Refinery (before):	Dawra Refinery (after reconstruction):
 <p>Dawra Refinery - Baghdad 1991</p>	 <p>Dawra Refinery - Baghdad Reconstructed - 1991</p>
 <p>Dawra Refinery - Pipe Network 1991</p>	 <p>Dawra Refinery - Pipe Network Reconstructed - 1991</p>
 <p>Dawra Refinery - Baghdad 1991</p>	 <p>Dawra Refinery - Baghdad Reconstructed - 1991</p>
<p>Alwiya Operator (public switchboard): Before reconstruction</p>	<p>Alwiya Operator (after reconstruction):</p>



Special thanks to M. Hamed for the pictures and the info about the reconstruction effort.

- posted by river @ 1:52 AM

Thursday, February 02, 2006

Election Results...

Iraqi election results were officially announced nearly two weeks ago, but it was apparent from the day of elections which political parties would come out on top. I'm not even going to bother listing the different types of election fraud witnessed all over Iraq- it's a tedious subject and one we've been discussing for well over a month.

The fact that a Shia, Iran-influenced religious list came out on top is hardly surprising. I'm surprised, however, at Iraqis who seem to be astonished at the outcome. Didn't we, over the last three years, see this coming? Iranian influenced clerics had a strong hold right from 2003. Their militias were almost instantly incorporated into the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense as soon a move was made to create new Iraqi security forces. Sistani has been promoting them from day one.

Why is it so very surprising that in times of calamity people turn to religion? It happens all over the world. During tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, blockades, wars- people turn to deities... It's simple- when all else fails, there is always a higher power for most people.

After nearly three years of a failing occupation, I personally believe that many Iraqis voted for religious groups because it was counted as a vote against America and the occupation itself. No matter what American policy makers say to their own public- and no matter how many pictures Rumsfeld and Condi take with our fawning politicians- most Iraqis do not trust Americans. America as a whole is viewed as a devilish country

that is, at best, full of self-serving mischief towards lesser countries and, at worst, an implementer of sanctions, and a warmongering invader.

Even Iraqis who believe America is here to help (and they seem to have grown fewer in number these days), believe that it helps not out of love for Iraqis, but out of self-interest and greed.

Shia religious parties, like SCIRI and Da'awa, have decidedly changed their tone in the last year. During 2003, they were friends of America- they owed the US their current power inside of the country. Today, as Iraqis are becoming more impatient with the American presence inside of Iraq, they are claiming that they will be the end of the 'occupiers'. They openly blame the Americans for the lack of security and general chaos. The message is quite different. In 2003, there was general talk of a secular Iraq; today, that no longer seems to be an option.

In 2003, Jaffari was claiming he didn't want to see Iraqi women losing their rights, etc. He never mentioned equal rights- but he did throw in a word here and there about how Iraqi women had a right to an education and even a job. I was changing channels a couple of weeks ago and I came across Jaffari speaking to students from Mustansiriyah University- one of Iraq's largest universities, with campuses in several areas in Baghdad. I couldn't see the students- he might have been speaking with a group of penguins, for all I could tell. The camera was focused on him- his shifty eyes and low, mumbling voice.

On his right sat an Ayatollah with a black turban and black robes. He looked stern and he nodded with satisfaction as Jaffari spoke to the students (or penguins). His speech wasn't about science, technology or even development- it was a religious sermon about heaven and hell, good and evil.

I noticed two things immediately. The first was that he seemed to be speaking to only male students. There were no females in the audience. He spoke of their female 'sisters' in absentia, as if they had absolutely no representation in the gathering. The second thing was that he seemed to be speaking to only Shia because he kept mentioning their 'Sunni brothers', as if they too were absent. He sermonized about how the men should take care of the women and how Sunnis weren't bad at all. I waited to hear him speak about Iraqi unity, and the need to not make religious distinctions- those words never came.

In spite of all this, pro-war Republicans remain inanely hopeful. Ah well- so Ayatollahs won out this election- the next election will be better! But there is a problem...

The problem with religious parties and leaders in a country like Iraq, is that they control a following of fervent believers, not just political supporters. For followers of Da'awa and SCIRI, for example, it's not about the policy or the promises or the puppet in power. It's like the pope for devout Catholics- you don't question the man in the chair because he is there by divine right, almost. You certainly don't question his policies.

Ayatollahs are like that. Muqtada Al-Sadr is ridiculous. He talks like his tongue is swollen up in his mouth and he always looks like he needs to bathe. He speaks with an intonation that indicates a fluency in Farsi and yet... he commands an army of followers because his grandfather was a huge religious figure. He could be the least educated, least enlightened man in the country and he'd still have people willing to lay down their lives at his command because of his family's religious history. (Lucky Americans- he announced a week ago that should Iran come under US attack, he and his followers would personally rise up to Iran's defense.)

At the end of the day, people who follow these figures tell themselves that even if the current leader isn't up to par, the goal and message remain the same- religion, God's word as law. When living in the midst of a war-torn country with a situation that is deteriorating and death around every corner, you turn to God because Iyad Allawi couldn't get you electricity and security- he certainly isn't going to get you into heaven should you come face to face with a car bomb.

The trouble with having a religious party in power in a country as diverse as Iraq is that you automatically alienate everyone not of that particular sect or religion. Religion is personal- it is something you are virtually born into... it belongs to the heart, the mind, the spirit- and while it is welcome in day to day dealings, it shouldn't be politicized.

Theocracies (and we seem to be standing on the verge of an Iranian influenced one), grow stronger with time because you cannot argue religion. Politicians are no longer politicians- they are Ayatollahs- they become modern-day envoys of God, to be

worshipped, not simply respected. You cannot challenge them because for their followers, that is a challenge to a belief- not a person or a political party.

You go from being a critic or 'opposition' to simply being a heathen when you argue religious parties.

Americans write to me wondering, "But where are the educated Iraqis? Why didn't they vote for secular parties?" The educated Iraqis have been systematically silenced since 2003. They've been pressured and bullied outside of the country. They've been assassinated, detained, tortured and abducted. Many of them have lost faith in the possibility of a secular Iraq.

Then again... who is to say that many of the people who voted for religious parties aren't educated? I know some perfectly educated Iraqis who take criticism towards parties like Da'awa and SCIRI as a personal affront. This is because these parties are so cloaked and cocooned within their religious identity, that it is almost taken as an attack against Shia in general when one criticizes them. It's the same thing for many Sunnis when a political Sunni party comes under criticism.

That's the danger of mixing politics and religion- it becomes personal.

I try not to dwell on the results too much- the fact that Shia religious fundamentalists are currently in power- because when I do, I'm filled with this sort of chill that leaves in its wake a feeling of quiet terror. It's like when the electricity goes out suddenly and

you're plunged into a deep, quiet, almost tangible darkness- you try not to focus too intently on the subtle noises and movements around you because the unseen possibilities will drive you mad...

- posted by river @ 1:34 AM

Saturday, February 11, 2006

The Raid...

We were collected at my aunts house for my cousins birthday party a few days ago. J. just turned 16 and my aunt invited us for a late lunch and some cake. It was a very small gathering- three cousins- including myself- my parents, and J.'s best friend, who also happened to be a neighbor [sic].

The lunch was quite good- my aunt is possibly one of the best cooks in Baghdad. She makes traditional Iraqi food and for J.'s birthday she had prepared all our favorites [sic]- dolma (rice and meat wrapped in grape leaves, onions, peppers, etc.), beryani rice, stuffed chicken, and some salads. The cake was ready-made and it was in the shape of a friendly-looking fish, J.'s father having forgotten she was an Aquarius and not a Pisces when he selected it, "I thought everyone born in February was a Pisces..." He explained when we pointed out his mistake.

When it was time to blow out the candles, the electricity was out and we stood around her in the dark and sang "Happy Birthday" in two different languages. She squeezed her eyes shut briefly to make a wish and then, with a single breath, she blew out the candles. She proceeded to open gifts- bear pajamas [sic], boy band CDs, a sweater with some sparkly things on it, a red and beige book bag... Your typical gifts for a teenager. The gift that made her happiest, however, was given by her father. After she'd opened up everything, he handed her a small, rather heavy, silvery package. She unwrapped it hastily and gasped with delight, "Baba- it's lovely!" She smiled as she held it up to the

light of the gas lamp to show it off. It was a Swiss Army knife- complete with corkscrew, nail clippers, and a bottle opener.

“You can carry it around in your bag for protection when you go places!” He explained. She smiled and gingerly pulled out the blade, “And look- when the blade is clean, it works as a mirror!” We all oohed and aahed our admiration and T., another cousin, commented she’d get one when the Swiss Army began making them in pink.

I tried to remember what I got on my 16th birthday and I was sure it wasn’t a knife of any sort.

By 8 pm, my parents and J.’s neighbor [sic] were gone. They had left me and T., our 24-year-old female cousin, to spend a night. It was 2 am and we had just gotten J.’s little brother into bed. He had eaten more than his share of cake and the sugar had made him wild for a couple of hours.

We were gathered in the living room and my aunt and her husband, Ammoo S. [Ammoo = uncle] were asleep. T., J. and I were speaking softly and looking for songs on the radio, having sworn not to sleep before the cake was all gone. T. was playing idly with her mobile phone, trying to send a message to a friend. “Hey- there’s no coverage here... is it just my phone?” She asked. J. and I both took out our phones and checked, “Mine isn’t working either...” J. answered, shaking her head. They both turned to me and I told them that I couldn’t get a signal either. J. suddenly looked alert and made a sort of “Uh-oh” sound as she remembered something. “R.- will you check the telephone next to you?” I picked up the ordinary telephone next to me and held my breath, waiting for a dial tone. Nothing.

“There’s no dial tone... but there was one earlier today- I was online...”

J. frowned and turned down the radio. “The last time this happened,” she said, “the area was raided.” The room was suddenly silent and we strained our ears. Nothing. I could hear a generator a couple of streets away, and I also heard the distant barking of a dog- but there was nothing out of the ordinary.

T. suddenly sat up straight, “Do you hear that?” She asked, wide-eyed. At first I couldn’t hear anything and then I caught it- it was the sound of cars or vehicles- moving slowly. “I can hear it!” I called back to T., standing up and moving towards the window. I looked out into the darkness and couldn’t see anything beyond the dim glow of lamps behind windows here and there.

“You won’t see anything from here- it’s probably on the main road!” J. jumped up and went to shake her father awake, “Baba, baba- get up- I think the area is being raided.” I heard J. call out as she approached her parents room. Ammoo S. was awake in moments and we heard him wandering around for his slippers and robe asking what time it was.

Meanwhile, the sound of cars had gotten louder and I remembered that one could see some of the neighborhood [sic] from a window on the second floor. T. and I crept upstairs quietly. We heard Ammoo S. unlocking 5 different locks on the kitchen door. “What’s he doing?” T. asked, “Shouldn’t he keep the doors locked?” We were looking out the window and there was the glow of lights a few streets away. I couldn’t see

exactly where they came from, as several houses were blocking our view, but we could tell something extraordinary was going on in the neighborhood [sic]. The sound of vehicles was getting louder, and it was accompanied by the sound of clanging doors and lights that would flash every once in a while.

We clattered downstairs and found J. and the aunt bustling around in the dark. “What should we do?” T. asked, wringing her hands nervously. The only time I’d ever experienced a raid was back in 2003 at an uncle’s house- and it was Americans. This was the first time I was to witness what we assumed would be an Iraqi raid.

My aunt was seething quietly, “This is the third time the bastards raid the area in 2 months... We’ll never get any peace or quiet...” I stood at their bedroom door and watched as she made the bed. They lived in a mixed neighborhood [sic]- Sunnis, Shia and Christians. It was a relatively new neighborhood [sic] that began growing in the late eighties. Most of the neighbors [sic] have known each other for years. “We don’t know what they’re looking for... La Ilaha Ila Allah...”

I stood awkwardly, watching them make preparations. J. was already in her room changing- she called out for us to do the same, “They’ll come in the house- you don’t want to be wearing pajamas [sic]....”

“Why, will they have camera crews with them?” T. smiled wanly, attempting some humor [sic]. No, J. replied, her voice muffled as she put on a sweater, “Last time they made us wait outside in the cold.” I listened for Ammoo S. and heard him outside,

taking the big padlock off of the gate in the driveway. “Why are you unlocking everything J.?” I called out in the dark.

“The animals will break down the doors if they aren’t open in three seconds and then they’ll be all over the garden and house... last time they pushed the door open on poor Abu H. three houses down and broke his shoulder...” J. was fully changed, and over her jeans and sweater she was wearing her robe. It was cold.

My aunt had dressed too and she was making her way upstairs to carry down my three-year-old cousin B. “I don’t want him waking up with all the noise and finding those bastards around him in the dark.”

Twenty minutes later, we were all assembled in the living room. The house was dark except for the warm glow of the kerosene heater and a small lamp in the corner. We were all dressed and waiting nervously, wrapped in blankets. T. and I sat on the ground while my aunt and her husband sat on the couch, B. wrapped in a blanket between them. J. was sitting in an armchair across from them. It was nearly 4 am.

Meanwhile, the noises outside had gotten louder as the raid got closer. Every once in a while, you could hear voices calling out for people to open a door or the sharp banging of a rifle against a door.

Last time they had raided my aunts area, they took away four men on their street alone. Two of them were students in their early twenties- one a law student, and the other an

engineering student, and the third man was a grandfather in his early sixties. There was no accusation, no problem- they were simply ordered outside, loaded up into a white pickup truck and driven away with a group of other men from the area. Their families haven't heard from them since and they visit the morgue almost daily in anticipation of finding them dead.

"There will be no problem," My aunt said sternly, looking at each of us, thin-lipped. "You will not say anything improper and they will come in, look around and go." Her eyes lingered on Ammoo S. He was silent. He had lit a cigarette and was inhaling deeply. J. said he'd begun smoking again a couple of months ago after having quit for ten years. "Are your papers ready?" She asked him, referring to his identification papers which would be requested. He didn't answer, but nodded his head silently.

We waited. And waited... I began nodding off and my dreams were interspersed with troops and cars and hooded men. I woke to the sound of T. saying, "They're almost here..." And lifted my head, groggy with what I thought was at least three hours of sleep. I squinted down at my watch and noted it was not yet 5 am. "Haven't they gotten to us yet?" I asked.

Ammoo S. was pacing in the kitchen. I could hear him coming and going in his slippers, pausing every now and then in front of the window. My aunt was still on the couch- she sat with B. in her arms, rocking him gently and murmuring prayers. J. was doing a last-minute check, hiding valuables and gathering our handbags into the living

room, “They took baba’s mobile phone during the last raid- make sure your mobile phones are with you.”

I could feel my heart pounding in my ears and I got closer to the kerosene heater in an attempt to dispel the cold that seemed to have permanently taken over my fingers and toes. T. was trembling, wrapped in her blanket. I waved her over to the heater but she shook her head and answered, “I... mmmm... n-n-not... c-c-cold...”

It came ten minutes later. A big clanging sound on the garden gate and voices yelling “Ifa7u [OPEN UP]”. I heard my uncle outside, calling out, “We’re opening the gate, we’re opening...” It was moments and they were inside the house. Suddenly, the house was filled with strange men, yelling out orders and stomping into rooms. It was chaotic. We could see flashing lights in the garden and lights coming from the hallways. I could hear Ammoo S. talking loudly outside, telling them his wife and the ‘children’ were the only ones in the house. What were they looking for? Was there something wrong? He asked.

Suddenly, two of them were in the living room. We were all sitting on the sofa, near my aunt. My cousin B. was by then awake, eyes wide with fear. They were holding large lights or ‘torches’ and one of them pointed a Klashnikov [sic] at us. “Is there anyone here but you and them?” One of them barked at my aunt. “No- it’s only us and my husband outside with you- you can check the house.” T.’s hands went up to block the glaring light of the torch and one of the men yelled at her to put her hands down, they fell limply in her lap. I squinted in the strong light and as my sight adjusted, I noticed

they were wearing masks, only their eyes and mouths showing. I glanced at my cousins and noted that T. was barely breathing. J. was sitting perfectly still, eyes focused on nothing in particular, I vaguely noted that her sweater was on backwards.

One of them stood with the Klashnikov [sic] pointed at us, and the other one began opening cabinets and checking behind doors. We were silent. The only sounds came from my aunt, who was praying in a tremulous whisper and little B., who was sucking away at his thumb, eyes wide with fear. I could hear the rest of the troops walking around the house, opening closets, doors and cabinets.

I listened for Ammoo S., hoping to hear him outside but I could only distinguish the harsh voices of the troops. The minutes we sat in the living room seemed to last forever. I didn't know where to look exactly. My eyes kept wandering to the man with the weapon and yet I knew staring at him wasn't a good idea. I stared down at a newspaper at my feet and tried to read the upside-down headlines. I glanced at J. again- her heart was beating so hard, the small silver pendant that my mother had given her just that day was throbbing on her chest in time to her heartbeat.

Suddenly, someone called out something from outside and it was over. They began rushing to leave the house, almost as fast as they'd invaded it. Doors slamming, lights dimming. We were left in the dark once more, not daring to move from the sofa we were sitting on, listening as the men disappeared, leaving only a couple to stand at our gate.

“Where’s baba?” J. asked, panicking for a moment before we heard his slippers feet in the driveway. “Did they take him?” Her voice was getting higher. Ammoo S. finally walked into the house, looking weary and drained. I could tell his face was pale even in the relative dark of the house. My aunt sat sobbing quietly in the living room, T. comforting her. “Houses are no longer sacred... We can’t sleep... We can’t live... If you can’t be safe in your own house, where can you be safe? The animals... the bastards...”

We found out a few hours later that one of our neighbors [sic], two houses down, had died. Abu Salih was a man in his seventies and as the Iraqi mercenaries raided his house, he had a heart-attack. His grandson couldn’t get him to the hospital on time because the troops wouldn’t let him leave the house until they’d finished with it. His grandson told us later that day that the Iraqis were checking the houses, but the American troops had the area surrounded and secured. It was a coordinated raid.

They took at least a dozen men from my aunts area alone- their ages between 19 and 40. The street behind us doesn’t have a single house with a male under the age of 50- lawyers, engineers, students, ordinary laborers [sic]- all hauled away by the ‘security forces’ of the New Iraq. The only thing they share in common is the fact that they come from Sunni families (with the exception of two who I’m not sure about).

We spent the day putting clothes back into closets, taking stock of anything missing (a watch, a brass letter opener, and a walkman), and cleaning dirt and mud off of carpets.

My aunt was fanatic about cleansing and disinfecting everything saying it was all “Dirty, dirty, dirty...” J. has sworn never to celebrate her birthday again.

It’s almost funny- only a month ago, we were watching a commercial on some Arabic satellite channel- Arabiya perhaps. They were showing a commercial for Iraqi security forces and giving a list of numbers Iraqis were supposed to dial in the case of a terrorist attack... You call THIS number if you need the police to protect you from burglars or abductors... You call THAT number if you need the National Guard or special forces to protect you from terrorists... But...

Who do you call to protect you from the New Iraq’s security forces?

- posted by river @ 12:43 AM

Thursday, February 23, 2006

Tensions...

Things are not good in Baghdad.

There was an explosion this morning in a mosque in Samarra, a largely Sunni town. While the mosque is sacred to both Sunnis and Shia, it is considered one of the most important Shia visiting places in Iraq. Samarra is considered a sacred city by many Muslims and historians because it was made the capital of the Abassid Empire, after Baghdad, by the Abassid Caliph Al-Mu'tasim.

The name "Samarra" is actually derived from the phrase in Arabic "Sarre men ra'a" which translates to "A joy for all who see". This is what the city was named by Al-Mu'tasim when he laid the plans for a city that was to compete with the greatest cities of the time- it was to be a joy for all who saw it. It remained the capital of the Abassid Empire for nearly sixty years and even after the capital was Baghdad once again, Samarra flourished under the care of various Caliphs.

The mosque damaged with explosives today is the "Askari Mosque" which is important because it is believed to be the burial place of two of the 12 Shia Imams- Ali Al-Hadi and Hassan Al-Askari (father and son) who lived and died in Samarra. The site of the mosque is believed to be where Ali Al-Hadi and Hassan Al-Askari lived and were buried. Many Shia believe Al-Mahdi 'al muntadhar' will also be resurrected or will reappear from this mosque.

I remember visiting the mosque several years ago- before the war. We visited Samarra to have a look at the famous “Malwiya” tower and someone suggested we also visit the Askari mosque. I was reluctant as I wasn’t dressed properly at the time- jeans and a t-shirt are not considered mosque garb. We stopped by a small shop in the city and purchased a few inexpensive black abayas for us women and drove to the mosque.

We got there just as the sun was setting and I remember pausing outside the mosque to admire the golden dome and the intricate minarets. It was shimmering in the sunset and there seemed to be a million colors [sic]- orange, gold, white- it was almost glowing. The view was incredible and the environment was so peaceful and calm. There was none of the bustle and noise usually surrounding religious sites- we had come at a perfect time. The inside of the mosque didn’t disappoint either- elaborate Arabic script and more gold and this feeling of utter peace... I’m grateful we decided to visit it.

We woke up this morning to news that men wearing Iraqi security uniforms walked in and detonated explosives, damaging the mosque almost beyond repair. It’s heart-breaking and terrifying. There has been gunfire all over Baghdad since morning. The streets near our neighborhood [sic] were eerily empty and calm but there was a tension that had us all sitting on edge. We heard about problems in areas like Baladiyat where there was some rioting and vandalism, etc. and several mosques in Baghdad were attacked. I think what has everyone most disturbed is the fact that the reaction was so swift, like it was just waiting to happen.

All morning we've been hearing/watching both Shia and Sunni religious figures speak out against the explosions and emphasise that this is what is wanted by the enemies of Iraq- this is what they would like to achieve- divide and conquer. Extreme Shia are blaming extreme Sunnis and Iraq seems to be falling apart at the seams under foreign occupiers and local fanatics.

No one went to work today as the streets were mostly closed. The situation isn't good at all. I don't think I remember things being this tense- everyone is just watching and waiting quietly. There's so much talk of civil war and yet, with the people I know- Sunnis and Shia alike- I can hardly believe it is a possibility. Educated, sophisticated Iraqis are horrified with the idea of turning against each other, and even not-so-educated Iraqis seem very aware that this is a small part of a bigger, more ominous plan...

Several mosques have been taken over by the Mahdi militia and the Badir people seem to be everywhere. Tomorrow no one is going to work or college or anywhere.

People are scared and watchful. We can only pray.

- posted by river @ 1:21 AM

Monday, February 27, 2006

Volatile Days...

The last few days have been unsettlingly violent in spite of the curfew. We've been at home simply waiting it out and hoping for the best. The phone wasn't working and the electrical situation hasn't improved. We are at a point, however, where things like electricity, telephones and fuel seem like minor worries. Even complaining about them is a luxury Iraqis can't afford these days.

The sounds of shooting and explosions usually begin at dawn, at least that's when I first sense them, and they don't really subside until well into the night. There was a small gunfight on the main road near our area the day before yesterday, but with the exception of the local mosque being fired upon, and a corpse found at dawn three streets down, things have been relatively quiet.

Some of the neighbors [sic] have been discussing the possibility of the men setting up a neighborhood [sic] watch. We did this during the war and during the chaos immediately after the war. The problem this time is that the Iraqi security forces are as much to fear as the black-clad and hooded men attacking mosques, houses and each other.

It does not feel like civil war because Sunnis and Shia have been showing solidarity these last few days in a big way. I don't mean the clerics or the religious zealots or the politicians- but the average person. Our neighborhood [sic] is mixed and Sunnis and Shia alike have been outraged with the attacks on mosques and shrines. The telephones have been down, but we've agreed upon a very primitive communication arrangement.

Should any house in the area come under siege, someone would fire in the air three times. If firing in the air isn't an option, then someone inside the house would have to try to communicate trouble from the rooftop.

The mosques also have a code when they're in trouble, i.e. under attack, the man who does the call for prayer calls out "Allahu Akbar" three times until people from the area can come help protect the mosque or someone gets involved.

Yesterday they were showing Sunni and Shia clerics praying together in a mosque and while it looked encouraging, I couldn't help but feel angry. Why don't they simply tell their militias to step down- to stop attacking mosques and husseiniyas- to stop terrorizing people? It's so deceptive and empty on television- like a peaceful vision from another land. The Iraqi government is pretending dismay, but it's doing nothing to curb the violence and the bloodshed beyond a curfew. And where are the Americans in all of this? They are sitting back and letting things happen- sometimes flying a helicopter here or there- but generally not getting involved.

I'm reading, and hearing, about the possibility of civil war. The possibility. Yet I'm sitting here wondering if this is actually what civil war is like. Has it become a reality? Will we look back at this in one year, two years... ten... and say, "It began in February 2006..."? It is like a nightmare in that you don't realise it's a nightmare while having it- only later, after waking up with your heart throbbing, and your eyes searching the dark for a pinpoint of light, do you realise it was a nightmare...

- posted by river @ 2:27 AM

Monday, March 06, 2006

And the Oscar Goes to...

It's Oscar time once again. We've been bombarded with Oscar propaganda for nearly a month now. MBC and One TV (a channel from the Emirates) have been promising us live Oscar coverage since January. It seems like all the interviews and programs for the last week at least have been about the Oscars- Barbara Walters, Oprah, Inside Edition, Entertainment Tonight- it's an endless stream of Oscar nominees and analysts.

Now I've seen the nominees- we see them every year- and I've come to a conclusion- Iraqis need an award show. While the Hollywood glitterati [sic] make good entertainers, our local super stars, Hakeem, Jaffari, Talabani, Allawi et al. make GREAT entertainers. This last year we've seen several dramas unfold and our political leaders have been riveting!

So... not to be outdone by Barbara Walters and Oprah Winfrey- we bring you the Baghdad Burning Oscar Special!! Except, for our award show I suggest we change the name of the little statuette from Oscar to something more local and familiar. (Oscar is too close in pronunciation to the Arabic word "Iskar" which means "get drunk". Should we use "Oscar" I fear the award show would be hijacked by Sadr's religious militia, hence I would like to suggest the "Sayid" Awards!)

Ladies and gentlemen, without further ado, we bring you the nominees for the 2006 Sayid Awards!

Nominees for Best Actor:



Ibraheim Al-Jaffari in “Free Iraqi Elections” for his attempted portrayal of a non-sectarian, independent PM of a ‘legitimate’ Iraqi government.

George W. Bush in “OIF: The War on Terror” The third sequel to the original “Operation Iraqi Freedom: Weapons of Mass Destruction” and “Operation Iraqi Freedom: Liberating Iraqis”. Bush’s nomination comes for his convincing portrayal as the worlds first mentally challenged president.



Bayan Baqir Solagh in “Torture Houses”, for his world-class acting as the shocked and indignant Iraqi Minister of Interior during the whole torture houses scandal.

Abdul Aziz Al Hakeem in “Men in Black [Turbans]” as the deeply devout Mullah pretending to be independent of his masters in Iran.





Mihsan Abdul Hameed in “Fickle” for his compelling portrayal of a victimized pro-war, then suddenly anti-war, anti-occupation Sunni politician.

Nominee for Best Leading Actress:

Condi Rice in “Viva Iran!” as the vicious Secretary of State in the charade to stop Iran’s nuclear power program (in spite of Iranian control in Iraq).

Nominees for Best Supporting Actor:

Jalal Talbani in “Kaka President” (Kaka = Kurdish word for 'brother') for his attempt at playing the ‘legitimate’ leader of the New Iraq (and although, technically, he’s the star of the movie, we nominate him for best ‘supporting’ actor as the PM managed to upstage him all year).

Dick Cheney in “OIF: The War on Terror” for his role as the devoted, fanatical VP and his relentless insistence that all goes well in Iraq.

Muqtada Al Sadr in “Viva Iran!” as the young, charismatic, black-turbaned spiritual militia leader intent on protecting Iran from all harm and promoting tolerance between Sunnis and Shia (in spite of his Sadr militia responsible for vandalism and attacks against Sunnis and secularists).

Scott McClellan in “OIF: The War on Terror” and "Denial" best known for his ability to keep a straight face while reading through White House press briefings.

Nominees for special effects:

Ahmed Al Chalabi in “Disappearing Act” for his magnificent evaporation from the Iraqi political scene this year. Mr. Chalabi is quite the master of illusion and received a previous nomination for his disappearance from Jordan in “The Petra Bank Scandal”.

Best production:

“OIF: The War on Terror” (originally called “My Daddy’s War”) produced by Washington neocons, including Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, etc.

“Free Iraqi Elections”- produced (and directed) by Abdul Aziz Al Hakeem et al. and his army (quite literally) of supporters (the Badrists).

Best motion picture:

“OIF: The War on Terror” starring George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Condi Rice and others. A riveting drama set in Iraq. Rated “G” for ‘Gullibility’ and “R” for ‘Republican’.

“Disappearing Act” starring Ahmed Al Chalabi, Adnan Al Pachachi, and Ghazi Al Yawir.

“Free Iraqi Elections”- A black comedy based on the farfetched [sic] theory of free elections under foreign occupation starring Abdul Aziz Al Hakeem, Ibraheim Al-Jaffari and Muqtada Al Sadr.

“Kangaroo Court” - starring Saddam Hussein, Barazan Hassen, and various judges, prosecutors and lawyers.

Many honorable mentions:

First and foremost, an honorable [sic] mention to Bush’s speech writers. It must be the most difficult job in the world writing scripts to make George W. Bush sound/look not great, not even good- but passable. It must also be challenging having to write speeches using words with a maximum of two syllables.

An honorable [sic] mention to the Saudis for their support of Sunni extremists and Wahabis, the Iranians for their support of Shia extremist, and Americans for their support of chaos.

And so, as our Green Zone glitterati [sic] retire to their camps to celebrate their great victories, Iraqis wonder what wonderful, new cinematic opportunities await. There is much talk that a block buster is in the works - in the pre-production stage of this years most anticipated psychological thriller "Iraqi Civil War".

- posted by river @ 2:50 AM

Saturday, March 18, 2006

Three Years...

It has been three years since the beginning of the war that marked the end of Iraq's independence. Three years of occupation and bloodshed.

Spring should be about renewal and rebirth. For Iraqis, spring has been about reliving painful memories and preparing for future disasters. In many ways, this year is like 2003 prior to the war when we were stocking up on fuel, water, food and first aid supplies and medications. We're doing it again this year but now we don't discuss what we're stocking up for. Bombs and B-52's are so much easier to face than other possibilities.

I don't think anyone imagined three years ago that things could be quite this bad today. The last few weeks have been ridden with tension. I'm so tired of it all- we're all tired.

Three years and the electricity is worse than ever. The security situation has gone from bad to worse. The country feels like it's on the brink of chaos once more- but a pre-planned, pre-fabricated chaos being led by religious militias and zealots.

School, college and work have been on again, off again affairs. It seems for every two days of work/school, there are five days of sitting at home waiting for the situation to improve. Right now college and school are on hold because the "arba3eeniya" or the "40th Day" is coming up- more black and green flags, mobs of men in black and latmiyas. We were told the children should try going back to school next Wednesday. I

say “try” because prior to the much-awaited parliamentary meeting a couple of days ago, schools were out. After the Samarra mosque bombing, schools were out. The children have been at home this year more than they’ve been in school.

I’m especially worried about the Arba3eeniya this year. I’m worried we’ll see more of what happened to the Askari mosque in Samarra. Most Iraqis seem to agree that the whole thing was set up by those who had most to gain by driving Iraqis apart.

I’m sitting here trying to think what makes this year, 2006, so much worse than 2005 or 2004. It’s not the outward differences- things such as electricity, water, dilapidated buildings, broken streets and ugly concrete security walls. Those things are disturbing, but they are fixable. Iraqis have proved again and again that countries can be rebuilt. No- it’s not the obvious that fills us with foreboding.

The real fear is the mentality of so many people lately- the rift that seems to have worked it’s way through the very heart of the country, dividing people. It’s disheartening to talk to acquaintances- sophisticated, civilized people- and hear how Sunnis are like this, and Shia are like that... To watch people pick up their things to move to “Sunni neighborhoods [sic]” or “Shia neighborhoods [sic]”. How did this happen?

I read constantly analyses mostly written by foreigners or Iraqis who’ve been abroad for decades talking about how there was always a divide between Sunnis and Shia in Iraq (which, ironically, only becomes apparent when you're not actually living amongst

Iraqis they claim)... but how under a dictator, nobody saw it or nobody wanted to see it. That is simply not true- if there was a divide, it was between the fanatics on both ends. The extreme Shia and extreme Sunnis. Most people simply didn't go around making friends or socializing with neighbors based on their sect. People didn't care- you could ask that question, but everyone would look at you like you were silly and rude.

I remember as a child, during a visit, I was playing outside with one of the neighbors [sic] children. Amal was exactly my age- we were even born in the same month, only three days apart. We were laughing at a silly joke and suddenly she turned and asked coyly, "Are you Sanafir or Shanakil?" I stood there, puzzled. 'Sanafir' is the Arabic word for "Smurfs" and 'Shanakil' is the Arabic word for "Snorks". I didn't understand why she was asking me if I was a Smurf or a Snork. Apparently, it was an indirect way to ask whether I was Sunni (Sanafir) or Shia (Shanakil).

"What???" I asked, half smiling. She laughed and asked me whether I prayed with my hands to my sides or folded against my stomach. I shrugged, not very interested and a little bit ashamed to admit that I still didn't really know how to pray properly, at the tender age of 10.

Later that evening, I sat at my aunt's house and remember to ask my mother whether we were Smurfs or Snorks. She gave me the same blank look I had given Amal. "Mama- do we pray like THIS or like THIS?!" I got up and did both prayer positions. My mother's eyes cleared and she shook her head and rolled her eyes at my aunt, "Why are you asking? Who wants to know?" I explained how Amal, our Shanakil neighbor,

had asked me earlier that day. “Well tell Amal we’re not Shanakil and we’re not Sanafir- we’re Muslims- there’s no difference.”

It was years later before I learned that half the family were Sanafir, and the other half were Shanakil, but nobody cared. We didn’t sit around during family reunions or family dinners and argue Sunni Islam or Shia Islam. The family didn’t care about how this cousin prayed with his hands at his side and that one prayed with her hands folded across her stomach. Many Iraqis of my generation have that attitude. We were brought up to believe that people who discriminated in any way- positively or negatively- based on sect or ethnicity were backward, uneducated and uncivilized.

The thing most worrisome about the situation now, is that discrimination based on sect has become so commonplace. For the average educated Iraqi in Baghdad, there is still scorn for all the Sunni/Shia talk. Sadly though, people are being pushed into claiming to be this or that because political parties are promoting it with every speech and every newspaper- the whole ‘us’ / ‘them’. We read constantly about how ‘We Sunnis should unite with our Shia brothers...’ or how ‘We Shia should forgive our Sunni brothers...’ (note how us Sunni and Shia sisters don’t really fit into either equation at this point). Politicians and religious figures seem to forget at the end of the day that we’re all simply Iraqis.

And what role are the occupiers playing in all of this? It’s very convenient for them, I believe. It’s all very good if Iraqis are abducting and killing each other- then they can

be the neutral foreign party trying to promote peace and understanding between people who, up until the occupation, were very peaceful and understanding.

Three years after the war, and we've managed to move backwards in a visible way, and in a not so visible way.

In the last weeks alone, thousands have died in senseless violence and the American and Iraqi army bomb Samarra as I write this. The sad thing isn't the air raid, which is one of hundreds of air raids we've seen in three years- it's the resignation in the people. They sit in their homes in Samarra because there's no where to go. Before, we'd get refugees in Baghdad and surrounding areas... Now, Baghdadis themselves are looking for ways out of the city... out of the country. The typical Iraqi dream has become to find some safe haven abroad.

Three years later and the nightmares of bombings and of shock and awe have evolved into another sort of nightmare. The difference between now and then was that three years ago, we were still worrying about material things- possessions, houses, cars, electricity, water, fuel... It's difficult to define what worries us most now. Even the most cynical war critics couldn't imagine the country being this bad three years after the war... Allah yistur min il rab3a (God protect us from the fourth year).

- posted by river @ 3:28 AM

Tuesday, March 28, 2006

Uncertainty...

I sat late last night switching between Iraqi channels (the half dozen or so I sometimes try to watch). It's a late-night tradition for me when there's electricity- to see what the Iraqi channels are showing. Generally speaking, there still isn't a truly 'neutral' Iraqi channel. The most popular ones are backed and funded by the different political parties currently vying for power. This became particularly apparent during the period directly before the elections.

I was trying to decide between a report on bird flu on one channel, a montage of bits and pieces from various latmiyas on another channel and an Egyptian soap opera on a third channel. I paused on the Sharqiya channel which many Iraqis consider to be a reasonably toned channel (and which during the elections showed its support for Allawi in particular). I was reading the little scrolling news headlines on the bottom of the page. The usual- mortar fire on an area in Baghdad, an American soldier killed here, another one wounded there... 12 Iraqi corpses found in an area in Baghdad, etc. Suddenly, one of them caught my attention and I sat up straight on the sofa, wondering if I had read it correctly.

E. was sitting at the other end of the living room, taking apart a radio he later wouldn't be able to put back together. I called him over with the words, "Come here and read this- I'm sure I misunderstood..." He stood in front of the television and watched the words about corpses and Americans and puppets scroll by and when the news item I

was watching for appeared, I jumped up and pointed. E. and I read it in silence and E. looked as confused as I was feeling.

The line said:

وزارة الدفاع تدعو المواطنين الى عدم الانصياع لاوامر دوريات الجيش والشرطة الليلية اذا لم تكن برفقة قوات التحالف العاملة في تلك المنطقة

The translation:

“The Ministry of Defense requests that civilians do not comply with the orders of the army or police on nightly patrols unless they are accompanied by coalition forces working in that area.”

That’s how messed up the country is at this point.

We switched to another channel, the “Baghdad” channel (allied with Muhsin Abdul Hameed and his group) and they had the same news item, but instead of the general “coalition forces” they had “American coalition forces”. We checked two other channels. Iraqiya (pro-Da’awa) didn’t mention it and Forat (pro-SCIRI) also didn’t have it on their news ticker.

We discussed it today as it was repeated on another channel.

“So what does it mean?” My cousin’s wife asked as we sat gathered at lunch.

“It means if they come at night and want to raid the house, we don’t have to let them in.” I answered.

“They’re not exactly asking your permission,” E. pointed out. “They break the door down and take people away- or have you forgotten?”

“Well according to the Ministry of Defense, we can shoot at them, right? It’s trespassing-they can be considered burglars or abductors...” I replied.

The cousin shook his head, “If your family is inside the house- you’re not going to shoot at them. They come in groups, remember? They come armed and in large groups- shooting at them or resisting them would endanger people inside of the house.”

“Besides that, when they first attack, how can you be sure they DON’T have Americans with them?” E. asked.

We sat drinking tea, mulling over the possibilities. It confirmed what has been obvious to Iraqis since the beginning- the Iraqi security forces are actually militias allied to religious and political parties.

But it also brings to light other worrisome issues. The situation is so bad on the security front that the top two ministries in charge of protecting Iraqi civilians cannot trust each

other. The Ministry of Defense can't even trust its own personnel, unless they are "accompanied by American coalition forces".

It really is difficult to understand what is happening lately. We hear about talks between Americans and Iran over security in Iraq, and then American ambassador in Iraq accuses Iran of funding militias inside of the country. Today there are claims that Americans killed between 20 to 30 men from Sadr's militia in an attack on a husseiniya yesterday. The Americans are claiming that responsibility for the attack should be placed on Iraqi security forces (the same security forces they are constantly commending).

All of this directly contradicts claims by Bush and other American politicians that Iraqi troops and security forces are in control of the situation. Or maybe they are in control- just not in a good way.

They've been finding corpses all over Baghdad for weeks now- and it's always the same: holes drilled in the head, multiple shots or strangulation, like the victims were hung. Execution, militia style. Many of the people were taken from their homes by security forces- police or special army brigades... Some of them were rounded up from mosques.

A few days ago we went to pick up one of my female cousins from college. Her college happens to be quite close to the local morgue. E., our cousin L., and I all sat in the car

which, due to traffic, we parked slightly further away from the college to wait for our other cousin. I looked over at the commotion near the morgue.

There were dozens of people- mostly men- standing around in a bleak group. Some of them smoked cigarettes, others leaned on cars or pick-up trucks... Their expressions varied- grief, horror, resignation. On some faces, there was an anxious look of combined dread and anticipation. It's a very specific look, one you will find only outside the Baghdad morgue. The eyes are wide and bloodshot, as if searching for something, the brow is furrowed, the jaw is set and the mouth is a thin frown. It's a look that tells you they are walking into the morgue, where the bodies lay in rows, and that they pray they do not find what they are looking for.

The cousin sighed heavily and told us to open a couple of windows and lock the doors- he was going to check the morgue. A month before, his wife's uncle had been taken away from a mosque during prayer- they've yet to find him. Every two days, someone from the family goes to the morgue to see if his body was brought in. "Pray I don't find him... or rather... I just- we hate the uncertainty." My cousin sighed heavily and got out of the car. I said a silent prayer as he crossed the street and disappeared into the crowd.

E. and I waited patiently for H., who was still inside the college and for L. who was in the morgue. The minutes stretched and E. and I sat silently- smalltalk [sic] seeming almost blasphemous under the circumstances. L. came out first. I watched him tensely and found myself chewing away at my lower lip, "Did he find him? Inshalla he didn't find him..." I said to no one in particular. As he got closer to the car, he shook his head.

His face was immobile and grim, but behind the grim expression, we could see relief, “He’s not there. Hamdulilah [Thank God].”

“Hamdulilah” E. and I repeated the words in unison.

WE all looked back at the morgue. Most of the cars had simple, narrow wooden coffins on top of them, in anticipation of the son or daughter or brother. One frenzied woman in a black abaya was struggling to make her way inside, two relatives holding her back. A third man was reaching up to untie the coffin tied to the top of their car.

“See that woman- they found her son. I saw them identifying him. A bullet to the head.” The woman continued to struggle, her legs suddenly buckling under her, her wails filling the afternoon, and although it was surprisingly warm that day, I pulled at my sleeves, trying to cover my suddenly cold fingers.

We continued to watch the various scenes of grief, anger, frustration and every once in a while, an almost tangible relief as someone left the morgue having not found what they dreaded most to find- eyes watery from the smell, the step slightly lighter than when they went in, having been given a temporary reprieve from the worry of claiming a loved one from the morgue...

- posted by river @ 9:51 PM

Sunday, April 02, 2006

April Fool's Day...

Or 'kithbet neesan', as it is known in Arabic.

If the current Iraqi government should choose ANY day for their day- what better day than April 1? It's appropriately named 'Fool's Day', after all.

They have been foolishly trying to get a government together since they first announced the election results. And we've been patiently waiting. It's like being under the threat of punishment for weeks and weeks at a time and finally just wanting to have the punishment over with.

I don't think anyone believes they're going to make any improvements or major changes, we're just tired of waiting for the final formation. People need to know who'll be in power because they want to know who to pay bribes to or get a 'tazkiya' from when they need something done. We need to know which religious party to go to when the Interior Ministry goons take away a relative.

They've been bickering over the Prime Minister's position for so long now, I'm almost wishing Bremer were here to once again implement his whole "Puppet per month" arrangement as in 2003.

In any case, should you want to play an April Fool's Day joke on an Iraqi (albeit a late one- or maybe even next year), I suggest the following:

1. "Guess what?! There's going to be electricity this summer!!!" (For better effect, it is suggested a candle be broken in half and thrown high into the air with a whoop.)
2. "Guess what?! The Americans have declared they will be gone by 2010 and they won't leave permanent bases behind!!!" (This should be said with a straight face.)
3. "Guess what?! They didn't actually find three corpses in the strip of trees two streets away!!!"
4. "Guess what?! The Puppets finally formed a government!!!"
5. "Guess what?! They didn't actually detain [fill in with the name of a relative, friend- everyone knows someone in prison these days]!!!"
6. "Guess what?! Chalabi solved the gasoline crisis!!!"
7. "Guess what?! No more religious militias- they've been banned from the country!!!"
(This should be said in a low voice - just in case)
8. "Great news!! The US is going to make public how the billions of dollars in Iraqi oil money AND donations were 'spent'!!!"
9. "Guess what?! They're going to actually begin reconstructing the country and they estimate it will take 5 years!!!"

10. "Guess what?! They caught Zarqawi!!!" (This will only work on Iraqis who actually think he exists.)

- posted by river @ 10:46 PM

Nomination...

After an internet absence of a few days, I returned to find my inbox flooded with dozens of emails with the subject "Congratulations!!!". In mid March, "Baghdad Burning" won [Best Middle East and Africa blog and received a Bloggie](#) so I thought the sudden surge of congratulatory emails was for that esteemed blog award (we would like to thank the academy...).

But, I was shocked to find out [the BOOK "Baghdad Burning" had made the short list for the Samuel Johnson Prize](#)- a prestigious, British award for non-fiction!! I didn't even know it was on the long list for that award so it came as a huge surprise... I kept telling myself it was some sort of mistake because the other names on the short list are so illustrious but I got confirmation from [the British publisher - Marion Boyars](#).

I've been walking around in a bit of a daze since I found out. I feel like it's all happening to someone else and I have to keep reminding myself of it- while filling the water tanks, while cleaning out the kerosene heaters for storage and while changing the

newspaper in the parakeets cage (“I hope you know the person cleaning out your cage is a Samuel Johnson nominee...”)

I just want to say it doesn't matter if the book wins or loses- just to have it on that list is, in itself, an incredible honor [sic].

[Baghdad Burning \(Feminist Press\)](#)

[Baghdad Burning \(Marion Boyars\)](#)

- posted by river @ 11:23 PM

Saturday, April 22, 2006

A Royal Visit...

It's officially spring in Baghdad. We jokingly say that in Iraq, spring doesn't exist. We go immediately from cold, windy weather to a couple of months of humidity and dust storms, to a blazing, dry heat, i.e. summer. This is the month, however, for rolling up the carpeting and rugs and taking out the summer clothes.

Unpacking the summer clothes and putting away the winter clothes is a process that takes about a week in our household. When the transition from winter clothes to summer clothes is finally over, the house ends up smelling of naphthalene, and unused hand soap, which is sometimes used to store clothes or linen in order to ward off insects.

Besides the usual 'spring cleaning', etc. the last few weeks have been volatile, even by Iraqi standards. The area of A'adhamiya in Baghdad has seen some heavy fighting, especially during the last week. There's almost always some action in A'adhamiya but a week ago it got to the point where there was open fighting in the streets between Ministry of Interior militias and guerrillas. As a result of this, we have an elderly relative staying with us. Her son, my mother's second cousin, dropped her off at our house with the words, "Her heart can't take all the excitement. Some bullets shattered the windows on the second floor and we thought she was going to have a heart-attack."

Apparently, prior to this latest outbreak of violence in A'adhamiya, there was a 'silent agreement' between the guerrillas and the Iraqi police that no attacks would be

launched against Iraqi security forces in the area as long as Iraqi special commandos (Interior Ministry militias) would not attack homes in the area as they have been doing for the last year.

So we've been spending the days with Bibi Z. ('Bibi' being a Baghdadi word meaning "granny" or "nana") We don't know her exact age, but we estimate she's well into her eighties. She has a deceptively frail look about her- soft, almost transparent skin, a small face framed with long wisps of white hair. Her dark eyes are still very alive and have a look of permanent fascination because her brows are so white, they barely show up against her skin.

Having the distinction of being the oldest member of an Iraqi family has its privileges. Bibi Z. has installed herself as temporary reigning queen of the household- moving from room to room with the grace and authority of royalty. Within ten minutes of arriving at our house, she occupied my room and I was promptly relegated to the uncomfortable sofa in the living room. She spends the hours supervising everything from homework to housework, and inevitably advising on the best ways to store winter clothes, roll up the carpeting, and study algebra. Although she no longer cooks, she sometimes deigns to sample our cooking and always finds it in need of a spoon of this, or a pinch of that.

It's always fascinating to sit with one of the older generation of Iraqis. They inspire mixed feelings- they've seen so much tragedy and triumph living in a country like Iraq,

that it leaves one feeling both excited at the possibilities and frustrated with what seems to be a lifetime of instability.

Bibi Z.'s first memories are of the monarchy and she clearly remembers all the other subsequent governments and leaders; she even has gossip about some of the ones making a comeback now. "That young fellow wanting to be the king," she says of Al Sharif Ali, "I think he's the result of an affair between one of the princesses and an Egyptian palace servant." She confides, as we watch him in a brief reportage on one of the Iraqi channels.

At around 10 am this morning, the electricity went out and it was too early for the generator. I commented that we wouldn't be able to see what had happened overnight unless we listened to the radio. Bibi Z. told us about the first television she saw- in 1957. One of their wealthier neighbors [sic] had acquired a television and as soon as her husband headed off to work, the ladies in the area would gather at her house to watch an hour of television. "We would put on our abayas when the male tv presenter was speaking," she laughed. "It took Umm Adil two weeks to convince us that the presenter couldn't see us just as we saw him."

"And were the politicians just as bad?" I asked later as we watched Jaffari make some comments.

"History repeats itself... Politicians are opportunists... But they don't worry me- they were bad, but Iraqis were better." She continued to explain that through all of the drama

and change that combine to form the colorful [sic] mosaic of the Iraqi political scene during the previous century, one thing remained constant- Iraqi loyalty and solicitude towards one another.

She talked of the student revolts during the years of the monarchy. “When Iraq signed the Portsmouth Treaty, the students revolted and organized demonstrations against the king- they were chased throughout Baghdad. My father was a police officer and yet when they chased the students into our area, we slipped them into the house and helped them get away by jumping from rooftop to rooftop. Iraqis were Iraqis and we had our differences, but we took care of each other... And women and children were sacred- no one dared touch the women and children of the house.”

The one unforgivable sin back then was to have loyalties to the foreign occupier. “Today, the only ones who can guarantee their survival are the ones with the loyalties to an occupier- and even they aren’t safe.” She sighed heavily as she said this, her prayer beads clicking gently in her thin hands.

“For the first time in many years, I fear death.” She said last night to no one in particular, as we sat around after dinner, sipping tea. We all objected, wishing her a longer life, telling her she had many years ahead of her, God willing. She shook her head at us like we didn’t understand- couldn’t possibly understand. “All people die eventually and I’ve had a longer life than most Iraqis- today children and young people are dying. I only fear death because I was born under a foreign occupation... I never dreamed I would die under one.”

- posted by river @ 11:54 PM

Tuesday, May 02, 2006

American Hostages...

It was around the 10th or 11th of April, 2003. There had been no electricity in our area since the last days of March. The water was also cut off and most Iraqis still didn't have generators. We spent the days- and nights- listening to American and British war planes, listening for the tanks as they invaded the city, and praying. We also tried desperately to follow the news.

The state-controlled Iraqi channels had, seemingly, ceased to exist. Transmission had been bad since the war began- sometimes, we'd be able to access the channel clearly, and at other times, it was only a fuzzy blur of faces and scratchy national anthems. The official Iraqi radio station was no better- sometimes it seemed like they were transmitting from Mars- it was so far away. When we did get it clearly, none of it made sense: Sahhaf, the Minister of Information, would say, "There are no tanks in Baghdad!" and yet, explosions and the carcasses of burnt up cars with families still inside, said otherwise.

By the beginning of April, we had given up on getting any information from television and had to rely completely on the news we received through radio stations such as Monte Carlo, BBC and the Voice of America. VOA was nearly as useless as Sahhaf- we could never tell if the news they were broadcasting was real or if it was simply propaganda. In between news, VOA would broadcast the same songs over and over and over. I still can't hear Celine Dion's "A New Day Has Come" without shuddering because in my head I hear the sounds of war. "I was waiting for someone..." the roar of

a plane overhead ... “For a miracle to come...” the BOOM of a missile... “My heart told me to be strong...” the rat-tat-tat of an AK-47... I hate that song today.

One television station that had been broadcasting since the beginning of the war was an Iranian station called “Al Alam”. They had been broadcasting for the Iraqi public in Arabic with permission from the former government and they continued broadcasting even after the Iraqi stations stopped. Their coverage of the war was rather neutral. They gave facts and avoided unnecessary commentary or opinion and that, to a certain extent, made them trustworthy- especially since we really didn’t have any other options.

We had heard about the statue being pulled down on one radio station or another, but none of us had seen it because we had no television due to a lack of electricity. Some Iraqis were taking old televisions and connecting them to an ordinary car battery which is what they did back in 1991. E. and the cousin managed to dig up a small, old, black and white television my aunt had managed to overlook during last years spring cleaning. They had it hooked up and working in a matter of twenty minutes (and after a thorough dusting). There was no longer an Iraqi television station. There was only the Iranian one, transmitting clearly. The tanks were rolling through Baghdad and bombing everything in their path. The Apaches were flying low and it seemed like every hour the gunfire and explosions were intensifying.

It was around 9 pm on the 11th of April when we finally saw the footage of Saddam’s statue being pulled down by American troops- the American flag plastered on his face. We watched, stunned, as Baghdad was looted and burned by hordes of men, being

watched and saluted by American soldiers in tanks. Looking back at it now, it is properly ironic that our first glimpses of the ‘fall of Baghdad’ and the occupation of Iraq came to us via Iran- through that Iranian channel.

We immediately began hearing about the Iranian revolutionary guard, and how they had formed a militia of Iraqis who had defected to Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. We heard how they were already inside of the country and were helping to loot and burn everything from governmental facilities to museums. The Hakims and Badr made their debut, followed by several other clerics with their personal guard and militias, all seeping in from Iran.

Today they rule the country. Over the duration of three years, and through the use of vicious militias, assassinations and abductions, they’ve managed to install themselves firmly in the Green Zone. We constantly hear our new puppets rant and rave against Syria, against Saudi Arabia, against Turkey, even against the country they have to thank for their rise to power- America... But no one dares to talk about the role Iran is planning in the country.

The last few days we’ve been hearing about Iranian attacks on northern Iraq- parts of Kurdistan that are on the Iranian border. Several sites were bombed and various news sources are reporting Iranian troops by the thousand standing ready at the Iraqi border. Prior to this, there has been talk of Iranian revolutionary guard infiltrating areas like Diyala and even parts of Baghdad.

Meanwhile, the new puppets (simply a rotation of the same OLD puppets), after taking several months to finally decide who gets to play the role of prime minister, are now wrangling and wrestling over the ‘major’ ministries and which political party should receive what ministry. The reason behind this is that as soon as a minister is named from, say, SCIRI, that minister brings in ‘his people’ to key positions- his relatives, his friends and cronies, and most importantly- his personal militia. As soon as Al-Maliki was made prime minister, he announced that armed militias would be made a part of the Iraqi army (which can only mean the Badrists and Sadr’s goons).

A few days ago, we were watching one of several ceremonies they held after naming the new prime minister. Talbani stood in front of various politicians in a large room in the Green Zone and said, rather brazenly, that Iraq would not stand any ‘tadakhul’ or meddling by neighboring [sic] countries because Iraq was a ‘sovereign country free of foreign influence’. The cousin almost fainted from laughter and E. was wiping his eyes and gasping for air... as Talbani pompously made his statement- all big belly and grins- smiling back at him was a group of American army commanders or generals and to his left was Khalilzad, patting him fondly on the arm and gazing at him like a father looking at his first-born!

So while Iraqis are dying by the hundreds, with corpses turning up everywhere (last week they found a dead man in the open area in front of my cousins daughters school), the Iraqi puppets are taking their time trying to decide who gets to do the most stealing and in which ministry. Embezzlement, after all, is not to be taken lightly- one must give it the proper amount of thought and debate- even if the country is coming unhinged.

As for news of the new Iraqi army, it isn't going as smoothly as Bush and his crew portray. Today we watched footage of Iraqi soldiers in Anbar graduating. The whole ceremony was quite ordinary up until nearly the end- their commander announced they would be deployed to various areas and suddenly it was chaos. The soldiers began stripping their fatigues and throwing them around, verbally attacking their seniors and yelling and shoving. They were promised, when they signed up for the army in their areas, that they would be deployed inside of their own areas- which does make sense. There is news that they are currently on strike- refusing to be deployed outside of their own provinces.

One can't help but wonder if the 'area' they were supposed to be deployed to was the north of Iraq? Especially with Iranian troops on the border... Talbani announced a few days ago that the protection of Kurdistan was the responsibility of Iraq and I completely agree for a change- because Kurdistan IS a part of Iraq. Before he made this statement, it was always understood that only the Peshmerga would protect Kurdistan- apparently, against Iran, they aren't nearly enough.

The big question is- what will the US do about Iran? There are the hints of the possibility of bombings, etc. While I hate the Iranian government, the people don't deserve the chaos and damage of air strikes and war. I don't really worry about that though, because if you live in Iraq- you know America's hands are tied. Just as soon as Washington makes a move against Tehran, American troops inside Iraq will come

under attack. It's that simple- Washington has big guns and planes... But Iran has 150,000 American hostages.

- posted by river @ [12:59 AM](#)

Wednesday, May 31, 2006

Viva Muqtada...

It's fascinating to watch the world beyond Iraq prepare for the World Cup. I get pictures by email of people hanging flags and banners, in support of this team or that one. Oh we have flags and banners too- the hole-ridden black banners all over Baghdad, announcing deaths and wakes. The flags are all of one color [sic], usually- black, green, red, or yellow- representing a certain religious party or political group.

A friend who owns a shop in Karrada had a little problem with a certain flag last week. Karrada was one of the best mercantile areas in Baghdad prior to the war. It was the area you went to when you had a list of unrelated necessities- like shoes, a potato peeler, pink nail polish and a dozen blank CDs. You were sure to find everything you needed in under an hour.

After the war, SCIRI, Da'awa and other religious parties instantly opened up bureaus in the area. Shops that once displayed colorful [sic] clothes, and posters of women wearing makeup [sic], began looking more subdued. Soon, instead of pictures of the charming women advertising Dior perfume, shops began putting up pictures of Sistani, looking half-alive, shrouded in black. Or pictures of Sadr, grim and dark, and almost certainly not smelling like Dior.

This friend owns a small cosmetics shop where he sells everything from lipstick to head scarves. His apartment is located right over the shop so that when he looks down from the living room window, he can see whoever is standing at the shop door. G. inherited

the shop from his father, who sold sewing materials instead of cosmetics. The shop has been in his family for nearly 20 years. Prior to the war, his wife and sister ran the shop, making the most persuasive sales duo in the history of cosmetics probably (the proof of this being a garishly colored [sic] neck scarf I bought 4 years ago and never took out of the closet since). After the war, and various threats in the form of letters and broken windows, G. began running the shop personally and in addition to cosmetics, he introduced an appropriately dark line of flowing abbayas and headscarves.

The last time I visited G. in his shop was two weeks ago. Since January, G.'s shop has been the center [sic] of some football (soccer) activity. His obsession with football has gotten to the point where the shop closes up two hours early so that E., the cousin and various other friends can gather for PlayStation FIFA tournaments. These tournaments are basically a group of grown men sitting around, maneuvering [sic] little digital men running around after a digital ball, screaming encouragement and insults at each other. If you walk into the shop looking to buy something during those hours, you risk being thrown out or simply told to "Just take it, take it- whatever it is. Take it and GO!". Every World Cup year, G. and his wife only half-jokingly quarrel about changing his only sons name to that of the footballer of the year. (As a sort of compromise, family and friends have all agreed to call his 14-year-old son "Ronaldino [sic]" until the games are over.)

G.'s cousin, who has lived in Canada for nearly 15 years, recently sent G. a large, colorful [sic] Brazilian flag- perfect for hanging on a shop window. He told us how he was planning to hang it right in the center [sic] and paint under it in big bold letters

“VIVA BRASILIA!!”. E. looked dubious as G. excitedly described how he’d be changing the colors [sic] of the display- green and yellow to match the flag.

It was up for nearly two whole days before the problems began. The first hint of a problem came through G.’s neighbor [sic]. He stopped by the shop and told G. that a black-turbaned young cleric had been walking past the shop window, when the flag attracted his attention. According to the neighbor [sic] Abu Rossul, the young cleric stopped, gazed at the flag, took note of the shops name and location and went on his way. G. shrugged it off with the words, “Well maybe he’s a fan of Brazil too...” Abu Rossul wasn’t so sure, “He looked more like the ‘Viva Sadr!’ type to me...”.

A day later, G. had a visit at noon. A young black-clad cleric walked into the shop, and had a brief look around. G. tried to interest him in some lovely headscarves [sic] and abbayas, but he was not to be deterred from his apparent mission. He claimed to be a ‘representative’ from the Sadr press bureau which was a few streets away and he had a message for G.: the people at the abovementioned [sic] bureau were not happy with G.’s display. Where was his sense of national pride? Where was his sense of religion? Instead of the face of a heathen player, there were pictures of the first Sadr, or better yet, Muqtada! Why did he have a foreign flag plastered obscenely on his display window? Should he feel the need for a flag, there was the Iraqi flag to put up. Should he feel the necessity for a green flag, like the one in the display, there was the green flag of “Al il Bayt”... Democracy, after all, is all about having options.

G. wasn't happy at all. He told the young cleric he would find a 'solution' and made a peace offering of some inexpensive men's slippers and some cotton undershirts [sic] he sometimes sold. That evening, he conferred with various relatives and friends and although nearly everyone advised him to take down the flag, he insisted it should remain on display as a matter of principle. His wife even offered to turn it into a curtain or bed sheets for him to enjoy until the games were over. He was adamant about keeping it up.

Two days later, he found a rather dramatic warning letter slipped under the large aluminum [sic] outer door. In a nutshell, it declared G. and people like him 'heathens' and demanded he take down the flag or he would be exposing himself to danger. It takes quite a bit to shake up a guy like G., but the same day he had the flag down and the display was back to normal.

As it turns out, Muqtada has a fatwa against football (soccer). I downloaded it and this is a translation of what he says when someone asks him for a fatwa on football and the World Cup:

“In reality, my father's position on this topic isn't deficient... Not only my father but Sharia also prohibits such activities which keep the followers too occupied for worshipping [sic], keep people from remembering [to worship]. Habeebi, the West created things that keep us from completing ourselves (perfection). What did they make us do? Run after a ball, habeebi... What does that mean? A man, this large and this tall, Muslim- running after a ball? Habeebi, this 'goal' as it is called... if you want to run,

run for a noble goal. Follow the noble goals which complete you and not the ones that demean you. Run after a goal, put it in your mind and everyone follows their own path to the goal to satisfy God. That is one thing. The second thing, which is more important, we find that the West and especially Israel, habeebi the Jews, did you see them playing soccer? Did you see them playing games like Arabs play? They let us keep busy with soccer and other things and they've left it. Have you heard that the Israeli team, curse them, got the World Cup? Or even America? Only other games... They've kept us occuppied [sic] with them- singing, and soccer, and smoking, stuff like that, satellites used for things which are blasphemous while they occuppy [sic] themselves with science etc. Why habeebi? Are they better than us- no we're better than them.”

Important note: Islamic Sharia does not prohibit soccer/football or sports- it's only prohibited by the version of Sharia in Muqtada's dark little head. I wonder what he thinks of tennis, swimming and yoga...

I listened to the fatwa, with him getting emotional about playing football, and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Foreign occupation and being a part of a puppet government- those things are ok. Football, however, will be the end of civilization as we know it, according to Muqtada. It's amusing- they look nothing alike- yet he reminds me so much of Bush. He can barely string two sentences together properly and yet, millions of people consider his word law. So when Bush raves about the new 'fledgling Iraqi government' 'freely elected' into power, you can take a look at Muqtada and see one of the fledglings. He is currently one of the most powerful men in the country for his followers.

So this is democracy. This is one of the great minds of Bush's democratic Iraq.

Sadr's militia control parts of Iraq now. Just a couple of days ago, his militia, with the help of Badr, were keeping women from visiting the market in the southern city of Karbala. Women weren't allowed in the marketplace and shop owners were complaining that their businesses were suffering. Welcome to the new Iraq.

It's darkly funny to see what we've turned into, and it is also anguishing. Muqtada Al-Sadr is a measure of how much we've regressed these last three years. Even during the Iran-Iraq war and the sanctions, people turned to sports to keep their mind off of day-to-day living. After the occupation, we won a football match against someone or another and we'd console ourselves with "Well we lose wars- but we win football!" From a country that once celebrated sports- football (soccer) especially- to a country that worries if the male football players are wearing long enough shorts or whether all sports fans will face eternal damnation... That's what we've become.

- posted by river @ 12:05 AM

Tuesday, June 06, 2006

Bad Day...

It's been a horrible day. We woke up to unbearable heat. Our area averages about 4 hours electricity daily and the rest is generator electricity, which means we can use our ceiling fans, but there's no way we can use air conditioners.

We woke up to an ominous silence- an indicator that the generator isn't working. E. went next door to check and got a confirmation. It might not work all day. The neighbor [sic] responsible for it was going to bring by the 'generator doctor' as soon as he was free.

The electricity came at 6 pm for only twenty minutes- as if to taunt us. The moment the lights flickered on, we were gathered in the kitchen and we could hear the neighborhood [sic] children began to hoot and holler [sic] with joy.

[Before that, we heard the news about the dozens abducted from the Salhiya area in Baghdad.](#) Salhiya is a busy area where many travel agencies have offices. It has been particularly busy since the war because people who want to leave to Jordan and Syria all make their reservations from one office or another in that area.

According to people working and living in the area, around 15 police cars pulled up to the area and uniformed men began pulling civilians off the streets and from cars, throwing bags over their heads and herding them into the cars. Anyone who tried to

object was either beaten or pulled into a car. The total number of people taken away is estimated to be around 50.

This has been happening all over Iraq- mysterious men from the Ministry of Interior rounding up civilians and taking them away. It just hasn't happened with this many people at once. The disturbing thing is that the Iraqi Ministry of Interior has denied that it had anything to do with this latest mass detention (which is the new trend with them- why get tangled up with human rights organizations about mass detentions, torture and assassinations- just deny it happened!). That isn't a good sign- it means these people will probably be discovered dead in a matter of days. We pray they'll be returned alive...

Another piece of particularly bad news came later during the day. [Several students riding a bus to school were assassinated in Dora area](#). No one knows why- it isn't clear. Were they Sunni? Were they Shia? Most likely they were a mix... Heading off for their end-of-year examination- having stayed up the night before to study in the heat. When they left their houses, they were probably only worried about whether they'd pass or fail- their parents sending them off with words of encouragement and prayer. Now they'll never come home.

There's an ethnic cleansing in progress and it's impossible to deny. People are being killed according to their ID card. Extremists on both sides are making life impossible. Some of them work for 'Zarqawi', and the others work for the Iraqi Ministry of Interior. We hear about Shia being killed in the 'Sunni triangle' and corpses of Sunnis named

'Omar' (a Sunni name) arriving by the dozen at the Baghdad morgue. I never thought I'd actually miss the car bombs. At least a car bomb is indiscriminate. It doesn't seek you out because you're Sunni or Shia.

We still don't have ministers in the key ministries- defense and interior. Iraq is falling apart and Maliki and his team are still bickering over who should get more power- who is more qualified to oppress Iraqis with the help of foreign occupiers? On top of all of this, rumor [sic] has it that the Iraqi parliament have a 'vacation' coming up during July and August. They're so exhausted with the arguing, and struggling for power, they need to take a couple of months off to rest. They'll leave their well-guarded homes behind for a couple of months, and spend some time abroad with their families (who can't live in Iraq anymore [sic]- they're too precious for that).

Where does one go to avoid the death and destruction? Are the Americans happy with this progress? Does Bush still insist we're progressing?

Emily Dickinson wrote, "*hope is a thing with feathers*". If what she wrote is true, then hope has flown far- very far- from Iraq...

- posted by river @ 2:53 AM

Saturday, June 10, 2006

Zarqawi...

So 'Zarqawi' is finally dead. It was an interesting piece of news that greeted us yesterday morning (or was it the day before? I've lost track of time...). I didn't bother with the pictures and film they showed of him because I, personally, have been saturated with images of broken, bleeding bodies.

The reactions have been different. There's a general consensus amongst family and friends that he won't be missed, whoever he is. There is also doubt- who was he really? Did he even exist? Was he truly the huge terror the Americans made him out to be? When did he actually die? People swear he was dead back in 2003... The timing is extremely suspicious: just when people were getting really fed up with the useless Iraqi government, Zarqawi is killed and Maliki is hailed the victorious leader of the occupied world! (And no- Iraqis aren't celebrating in the streets- worries over electricity, water, death squads, tests, corpses and extremists in high places prevail right now.)

I've been listening to reactions- mostly from pro-war politicians and the naïveté they reveal is astounding. Maliki (the current Iraqi PM) was almost giddy as he made the news public (he had even gone the extra mile and shaved!). Do they really believe it will end the resistance against occupation? As long as foreign troops are in Iraq, resistance or 'insurgency' will continue- why is that SO difficult to understand? How is that concept a foreign one?

"A new day for Iraqis" is the current theme of the Iraqi puppet government and the Americans. Like it was "A New Day for Iraqis" on April 9, 2003 . And it was "A New Day for Iraqis" when they killed Oday and Qusay. Another "New Day for Iraqis" when they caught Saddam. More "New Day" when they drafted the constitution... I'm beginning to think it's like one of those questions they give you on IQ tests: If 'New' is equal to 'More' and 'Day' is equal to 'Suffering', what does "New Day for Iraqis" mean?

How do I feel? To hell with Zarqawi (or Zayrkawi as Bush calls him). He was an American creation- he came along with them- they don't need him anymore [sic], apparently. His influence was greatly exaggerated but he was the justification for every single family they killed through military strikes and troops. It was WMD at first, then it was Saddam, then it was Zarqawi. Who will it be now? Who will be the new excuse for killing and detaining Iraqis? Or is it that an excuse is no longer needed- they have freedom to do what they want. The slaughter in Haditha months ago proved that. "They don't need him anymore [sic]," our elderly neighbor [sic] waved the news away like he was shooin' flies, "They have fifty Zarqawis in government."

So now that Zarqawi is dead, and because according to Bush and our Iraqi puppets he was behind so much of Iraq's misery- things should get better, right? The car bombs should lessen, the ethnic cleansing will come to a halt, military strikes and sieges will die down... That's what we were promised, wasn't it? That sounds good to me. Now- who do they have to kill to stop the Ministry of Interior death squads, and trigger-happy foreign troops?

- posted by river @ 12:47 AM

Tuesday, July 11, 2006

Atrocities...

It promises to be a long summer. We're almost at the mid-way point, but it feels like the days are just crawling by. It's a combination of the heat, the flies, the hours upon hours of no electricity and the corpses which keep appearing everywhere.

The day before yesterday was catastrophic. The day began with news of the killings in Jihad Quarter. According to people who live there, black-clad militiamen drove in mid-morning and opened fire on people in the streets and even in houses. They began pulling people off the street and checking their ID cards to see if they had Sunni names or Shia names and then the Sunnis were driven away and killed. Some were executed right there in the area. The media is playing it down and claiming 37 dead but the people in the area say the number is nearer 60.

The horrific thing about the killings is that the area had been cut off for nearly two weeks by Ministry of Interior security forces and Americans. Last week, a car bomb was set off in front of a 'Sunni' mosque people in the area visit. The night before the massacre, a car bomb exploded in front of a Shia husseiniya in the same area. The next day was full of screaming and shooting and death for the people in the area. No one is quite sure why the Americans and the Ministry of Interior didn't respond immediately. They just sat by, on the outskirts of the area, and let the massacre happen.

At nearly 2 pm, we received some terrible news. We lost a good friend in the killings. T. was a 26-year-old civil engineer who worked with a group of friends in a

consultancy bureau in Jadriya. The last time I saw him was a week ago. He had stopped by the house to tell us his sister was engaged and he'd brought along with him pictures of latest project he was working on- a half-collapsed school building outside of Baghdad.

He usually left the house at 7 am to avoid the morning traffic jams and the heat. Yesterday, he decided to stay at home because he'd promised his mother he would bring Abu Kamal by the house to fix the generator which had suddenly died on them the night before. His parents say that T. was making his way out of the area on foot when the attack occurred and he got two bullets to the head. His brother could only identify him by the blood-stained t-shirt he was wearing.

People are staying in their homes in the area and no one dares enter it so the wakes for the people who were massacred haven't begun yet. I haven't seen his family yet and I'm not sure I have the courage or the energy to give condolences. I feel like I've given the traditional words of condolences a thousand times these last few months, "Baqiya ib hayatikum... Akhir il ahzan..." or "May this be the last of your sorrows." Except they are empty words because even as we say them, we know that in today's Iraq any sorrow- no matter how great- will not be the last.

There was also an attack yesterday on Ghazaliya though we haven't heard what the casualties are. People are saying it's Sadr's militia, the Mahdi army, behind the killings. The news the world hears about Iraq and the situation in the country itself are wholly different. People are being driven out of their homes and areas by force and killed in the

streets, and the Americans, Iranians and the Puppets talk of national conferences and progress.

It's like Baghdad is no longer one city, it's a dozen different smaller cities each infected with its own form of violence. It's gotten so that I dread sleeping because the morning always brings so much bad news. The television shows the images and the radio stations broadcast it. The newspapers show images of corpses and angry words jump out at you from their pages, "civil war... death... killing... bombing... rape..."

Rape. The latest of American atrocities. Though it's not really the latest- it's just the one that's being publicized the most. The poor girl Abeer was neither the first to be raped by American troops, nor will she be the last. The only reason this rape was brought to light and publicized is that her whole immediate family were killed along with her. Rape is a taboo subject in Iraq. Families don't report rapes here, they avenge them. We've been hearing whisperings about rapes in American-controlled prisons and during sieges of towns like Haditha and Samarra for the last three years. The naiveté of Americans who can't believe their 'heroes' are committing such atrocities is ridiculous. Who ever heard of an occupying army committing rape??? You raped the country, why not the people?

In the news they're estimating her age to be around 24, but Iraqis from the area say she was only 14. Fourteen. Imagine your 14-year-old sister or your 14-year-old daughter. Imagine her being gang-raped by a group of psychopaths and then the girl was killed and her body burned to cover up the rape. Finally, her parents and her five-year-old sister were also killed. Hail the American heroes... Raise your heads high supporters of

the 'liberation' - your troops have made you proud today. I don't believe the troops should be tried in American courts. I believe they should be handed over to the people in the area and only then will justice be properly served. And our ass of a PM, Nouri Al-Maliki, is requesting an 'independent investigation', ensconced safely in his American guarded compound because it wasn't his daughter or sister who was raped, probably tortured and killed. His family is abroad safe from the hands of furious Iraqis and psychotic American troops.

It fills me with rage to hear about it and read about it. The pity I once had for foreign troops in Iraq is gone. It's been eradicated by the atrocities in Abu Ghraib, the deaths in Haditha and the latest news of rapes and killings. I look at them in their armored [sic] vehicles and to be honest- I can't bring myself to care whether they are 19 or 39. I can't bring myself to care if they make it back home alive. I can't bring myself to care anymore [sic] about the wife or parents or children they left behind. I can't bring myself to care because it's difficult to see beyond the horrors. I look at them and wonder just how many innocents they killed and how many more they'll kill before they go home. How many more young Iraqi girls will they rape?

Why don't the Americans just go home? They've done enough damage and we hear talk of how things will fall apart in Iraq if they 'cut and run', but the fact is that they aren't doing anything right now. How much worse can it get? People are being killed in the streets and in their own homes- what's being done about it? Nothing. It's convenient for them- Iraqis can kill each other and they can sit by and watch the bloodshed- unless they want to join in with murder and rape.

Buses, planes and taxis leaving the country for Syria and Jordan are booked solid until the end of the summer. People are picking up and leaving en masse [sic] and most of them are planning to remain outside of the country. Life here has become unbearable because it's no longer a 'life' like people live abroad. It's simply a matter of survival, making it from one day to the next in one piece and coping with the loss of loved ones and friends- friends like T.

It's difficult to believe T. is really gone... I was checking my email today and I saw three unopened emails from him in my inbox. For one wild, heart-stopping moment I thought he was alive. *T. was alive and it was all some horrific mistake!* I let myself ride the wave of giddy disbelief for a few precious seconds before I came crashing down as my eyes caught the date on the emails- he had sent them the night before he was killed. One email was a collection of jokes, the other was an assortment of cat pictures, and the third was a poem in Arabic about Iraq under American occupation. He had highlighted a few lines describing the beauty of Baghdad in spite of the war... And while I always thought Baghdad was one of the more marvelous [sic] cities in the world, I'm finding it very difficult this moment to see any beauty in a city stained with the blood of T. and so many other innocents...

- posted by river @ 11:43 PM

Sunday, July 30, 2006

Qana Massacre...

Although the sun is blinding this time of year in our part of the world, the Middle East is seeing some of its darkest days...

I woke up this morning to scenes of carnage and destruction on the television and for the briefest of moments, I thought it was footage of Iraq. [It took me a few seconds to realize it was actually Qana in Lebanon.](#) The latest village to see Israeli air strikes. The images were beyond gruesome- body parts and corpses being hauled out from under tons of debris. Wailing relatives and friends, searching for loved ones... So far, according to humanitarian organizations, 34 were children. They killed them while they were sleeping inside their bomb shelters- much like the Amriya Shelter massacre in 1991.

We saw the corpses of the children on television, lifeless and twisted grotesquely, what remained of their faces frozen in expressions of pain and shock. I just sat there and cried in front of the television. I didn't know I could still feel that sort of sorrow towards what has become a daily reality for Iraqis. It's not Iraq but it might as well be: It's civilians under lethal attack; it's a country fighting occupation.

I'm so frustrated I can't think straight. I'm full of rage against Israel, the US, Britain, Iran and most of Europe. The world is going to go to hell for standing by and allowing the massacre of innocents. For God's sake, 34 children??? The UN is beyond useless. They've gone from a union of nations working for the good of the world (if they ever

were even that), to a bunch of gravediggers. They're only good for digging mangled bodies out of the ruins of buildings and helping to identify and put them into mass graves. They won't stop a massacre- they won't even speak out against it- they'll just come by and help clean up the mess. Are the lives of Arabs worth so little? If this had happened in the US or UK or France or China, somebody would already have dropped a nuclear bomb... How is this happening?

Where is the Security Council??? Why haven't they stopped Israel? Ehud Olmert recently told Condi that he needs 10 to 14 more days of bloodshed- and nothing is being done about it! Where are the useless Arab leaders? Can't the pro-American, spineless emirs crawl out of their gold palaces long enough to condemn this taking of lives? Our presidents/leaders are only as influential as their oil barrels are deep.

And the world wonders how 'terrorists' are created! A 15-year-old Lebanese girl lost five of her siblings and her parents and home in the Qana bombing... Ehud Olmert might as well kill her now because if he thinks she's going to grow up with anything but hate in her heart towards him and everything he represents, then he's delusional.

Is this whole debacle [sic] the fine line between terrorism and protecting ones nation? If it's a militia, insurgent or military resistance- then it's terrorism (unless of course the militia, insurgent(s) and/or resistance are being funded exclusively by the CIA). If it's the Israeli, American or British army, then it's a pre-emptive strike, or a 'war on terror'. No matter the loss of hundreds of innocent lives. No matter the children who died last night- they're only Arabs, after all, right?

Right?

- posted by river @ 10:16 PM

Saturday, August 05, 2006

Summer of Goodbyes...

Residents of Baghdad are systematically being pushed out of the city. Some families are waking up to find a Klashnikov [sic] bullet and a letter in an envelope with the words "Leave your area or else." The culprits behind these attacks and threats are Sadr's followers- Mahdi Army. It's general knowledge, although no one dares say it out loud. In the last month we've had two different families staying with us in our house, after having to leave their neighborhoods [sic] due to death threats and attacks. It's not just Sunnis- it's Shia, Arabs, Kurds- most of the middle-class areas are being targeted by militias.

Other areas are being overrun by armed Islamists. The Americans have absolutely no control in these areas. Or maybe they simply don't want to control the areas because when there's a clash between Sadr's militia and another militia in a residential neighborhood [sic], they surround the area and watch things happen.

Since the beginning of July, the men in our area have been patrolling the streets. Some of them patrol the rooftops and others sit quietly by the homemade [sic] road blocks we have on the major roads leading into the area. You cannot in any way rely on Americans or the government. You can only hope your family and friends will remain alive- not safe, not secure- just alive. That's good enough.

For me, June marked the first month I don't dare leave the house without a hijab, or headscarf. I don't wear a hijab usually, but it's no longer possible to drive around

Baghdad without one. It's just not a good idea. (Take note that when I say 'drive' I actually mean 'sit in the back seat of the car'- I haven't driven for the longest time.) Going around bare-headed in a car or in the street also puts the family members with you in danger. You risk hearing something you don't want to hear and then the father or the brother or cousin or uncle can't just sit by and let it happen. I haven't driven for the longest time. If you're a female, you risk being attacked.

I look at my older clothes- the jeans and t-shirts and colorful [sic] skirts- and it's like I'm studying a wardrobe from another country, another lifetime. There was a time, a couple of years ago, when you could more or less wear what you wanted if you weren't going to a public place. If you were going to a friends or relatives house, you could wear trousers and a shirt, or jeans, something you wouldn't ordinarily wear. We don't do that anymore [sic] because there's always that risk of getting stopped in the car and checked by one militia or another.

There are no laws that say we have to wear a hijab (yet), but there are the men in head-to-toe black and the turbans, the extremists and fanatics who were liberated by the occupation, and at some point, you tire of the defiance. You no longer want to be seen. I feel like the black or white scarf I fling haphazardly on my head as I walk out the door makes me invisible to a certain degree- it's easier to blend in with the masses shrouded in black. If you're a female, you don't want the attention- you don't want it from Iraqi police, you don't want it from the black-clad militia man, you don't want it from the American soldier. You don't want to be noticed or seen.

I have nothing against the hijab, of course, as long as it is being worn by choice. Many of my relatives and friends wear a headscarf. Most of them began wearing it after the war. It started out as a way to avoid trouble and undue attention, and now they just keep it on because it makes no sense to take it off. What is happening to the country?

I realized how common it had become only in mid-July when M., a childhood friend, came to say goodbye before leaving the country. She walked into the house, complaining of the heat and the roads, her brother following closely behind. It took me to the end of the visit for the peculiarity of the situation to hit me. She was getting ready to leave before the sun set, and she picked up the beige headscarf folded neatly by her side. As she told me about one of her neighbors [sic] being shot, she opened up the scarf with a flourish, set it on her head like a pro, and pinned it snugly [sic] under her chin with the precision of a seasoned hijab-wearer. All this without a mirror- like she had done it a hundred times over... Which would be fine, except that M. is Christian.

If M. can wear one quietly- so can I.

I've said goodbye this last month to more people than I can count. Some of the 'goodbyes' were hurried and furtive- the sort you say at night to the neighbor [sic] who got a death threat and is leaving at the break of dawn, quietly.

Some of the 'goodbyes' were emotional and long-drawn, to the relatives and friends who can no longer bear to live in a country coming apart at the seams.

Many of the 'goodbyes' were said stoically- almost casually- with a fake smile plastered on the face and the words, "See you soon"... Only to walk out the door and want to collapse with the burden of parting with yet another loved one.

During times like these I remember a speech Bush made in 2003: One of the big achievements he claimed was the return of jubilant 'exiled' Iraqis to their country after the fall of Saddam. I'd like to see some numbers about the Iraqis currently outside of the country you are occupying... Not to mention internally displaced Iraqis abandoning their homes and cities.

I sometimes wonder if we'll ever know just how many hundreds of thousands of Iraqis left the country this bleak summer. I wonder how many of them will actually return. Where will they go? What will they do with themselves? Is it time to follow? Is it time to wash our hands of the country and try to find a stable life somewhere else?

- posted by river @ 12:38 AM

Wednesday, October 18, 2006

The Lancet Study...

This has been the longest time I have been away from blogging. There were several reasons for my disappearance the major one being the fact that every time I felt the urge to write about Iraq, about the situation, I'd be filled with a certain hopelessness that can't be put into words and that I suspect other Iraqis feel also.

It's very difficult at this point to connect to the internet and try to read the articles written by so-called specialists and analysts and politicians. They write about and discuss Iraq as I might write about the Ivory Coast or Cambodia- with a detachment and lack of sentiment that- I suppose- is meant to be impartial. Hearing American politicians is even worse. They fall between idiots like Bush- constantly and totally in denial, and opportunists who want to use the war and ensuing chaos to promote themselves.

The latest horror is the study published in the Lancet Journal concluding that over 600,000 Iraqis have been killed since the war. Reading about it left me with mixed feelings. On the one hand, it sounded like a reasonable figure. It wasn't at all surprising. On the other hand, I so wanted it to be wrong. But... who to believe? Who to believe....? American politicians... or highly reputable scientists using a reliable scientific survey technique?

The responses were typical- war supporters said the number was nonsense because, of course, who would want to admit that an action they so heartily supported led to the

deaths of 600,000 people (even if they were just crazy Iraqis...)? Admitting a number like that would be the equivalent of admitting they had endorsed, say, a tsunami, or an earthquake with a magnitude of 9 on the Richter scale, or the occupation of a developing country by a ruthless superpower... oh wait- that one actually happened. Is the number really that preposterous? Thousands of Iraqis are dying every month- that is undeniable. And yes, they are dying as a direct result of the war and occupation (very few of them are actually dying of bliss, as war-supporters and Puppets would have you believe).

For American politicians and military personnel, playing dumb and talking about numbers of bodies in morgues and official statistics, etc, seems to be the latest tactic. But as any Iraqi knows, not every death is being reported. As for getting reliable numbers from the Ministry of Health or any other official Iraqi institution, that's about as probable as getting a coherent, grammatically correct sentence from George Bush- especially after the ministry was banned from giving out correct mortality numbers. So far, the only Iraqis I know pretending this number is outrageous are either out-of-touch Iraqis abroad who supported the war, or Iraqis inside of the country who are directly benefiting from the occupation (\$) and likely living in the Green Zone.

The chaos and lack of proper facilities is resulting in people being buried without a trip to the morgue or the hospital. During American military attacks on cities like Samarra and Fallujah, victims were buried in their gardens or in mass graves in football fields. Or has that been forgotten already?

We literally do not know a single Iraqi family that has not seen the violent death of a first or second-degree relative these last three years. Abductions, militias, sectarian violence, revenge killings, assassinations, car-bombs, suicide bombers, American military strikes, Iraqi military raids, death squads, extremists, armed robberies, executions, detentions, secret prisons, torture, mysterious weapons – with so many different ways to die, is the number so far fetched?

There are Iraqi women who have not shed their black mourning robes since 2003 because each time the end of the proper mourning period comes around, some other relative dies and the countdown begins once again.

Let's pretend the 600,000+ number is all wrong and that the minimum is the correct number: nearly 400,000. Is that better? Prior to the war, the Bush administration kept claiming that Saddam killed 300,000 Iraqis over 24 years. After this latest report published in The Lancet, 300,000 is looking quite modest and tame. Congratulations Bush et al.

Everyone knows the 'official numbers' about Iraqi deaths as a direct result of the war and occupation are far less than reality (yes- even you war hawks know this, in your minuscule heart of hearts). This latest report is probably closer to the truth than anything that's been published yet. And what about American military deaths? When will someone do a study on the actual number of those? If the Bush administration is lying so vehemently about the number of dead Iraqis, one can only imagine the extent of lying about dead Americans...

- posted by river @ 11:35 PM

Sunday, November 05, 2006

When All Else Fails...

... Execute the dictator. It's that simple. When American troops are being killed by the dozen, when the country you are occupying is threatening to break up into smaller countries, when you have militias and death squads roaming the streets and you've put a group of Mullahs in power- execute the dictator.

Everyone expected this verdict from the very first day of the trial. There was a brief interlude when, with the first judge, it was thought that it might actually be a coherent trial where Iraqis could hear explanations and see what happened. That was soon over with the prosecution's first false witness. Events that followed were so ridiculous; it's difficult to believe them even now.

The sound would suddenly disappear when the defense or one of the defendants got up to speak. We would hear the witnesses but no one could see them- hidden behind a curtain, their voices were changed. People who were supposed to have been dead in the Dujail incident were found to be very alive.

Judge after judge was brought in because the ones in court were seen as too fair. They didn't instantly condemn the defendants (even if only for the sake of the media). The piece de resistance was the final judge they brought in. His reputation vies only that of Chalabi- a well-known thief and murderer who ran away to Iran to escape not political condemnation, but his father's wrath after he stole from the restaurant his father ran.

So we all knew the outcome upfront (Maliki was on television 24 hours before the verdict telling people not to 'rejoice too much'). I think what surprises me right now is the utter stupidity of the current Iraqi government. The timing is ridiculous-immediately before the congressional elections? How very convenient for Bush. Iraq, today, is at its very worst since the invasion and the beginning occupation. April 2003 is looking like a honeymoon month today. Is it really the time to execute Saddam?

I'm more than a little worried. This is Bush's final card. The elections came and went and a group of extremists and thieves were put into power (no, no- I meant in Baghdad, not Washington). The constitution which seems to have drowned in the river of Iraqi blood since its elections has been forgotten. It is only dug up when one of the Puppets wants to break apart the country. Reconstruction is an aspiration from another lifetime: I swear we no longer want buildings and bridges, security and an undivided Iraq are more than enough. Things must be deteriorating beyond imagination if Bush needs to use the 'Execute the Dictator' card.

Iraq has not been this bad in decades. The occupation is a failure. The various pro-American, pro-Iranian Iraqi governments are failures. The new Iraqi army is a deadly joke. Is it really time to turn Saddam into a martyr? Things are so bad that even pro-occupation Iraqis are going back on their initial 'WE LOVE AMERICA' frenzy. Laith Kubba (a.k.a. Mr. Catfish for his big mouth and constant look of stupidity) was recently on the BBC saying that this was just the beginning of justice, that people responsible for the taking of lives today should also be brought to justice. He seems to have forgotten he was one of the supporters of the war and occupation, and an important member of

one of the murderous pro-American governments. But history shall not forget Mr. Kubba.

Iraq saw demonstrations against and for the verdict. The pro-Saddam demonstrators were attacked by the Iraqi army. This is how free our media is today: the channels that were showing the pro-Saddam demonstrations have been shut down. Iraqi security forces promptly raided them. Welcome to the new Iraq. Here are some images from the Salahiddin and Zawra channels:



Zawra channel. The subtitle says: **Baghdad: Zawra satellite channel has stopped broadcasting by order of the government.**



Salahiddin's green screen which appeared suddenly says: Salahiddin Satellite Channel



Sharqiya channel announcing breaking news: **Two channels, Salahiddin and Zawra, shut down. Security forces raid the offices of the channels.**

It's not about the man- presidents come and go, governments come and go. It's the frustration of feeling like the whole country and every single Iraqi inside and outside of Iraq is at the mercy of American politics. It is the rage of feeling like a mere chess piece to be moved back and forth at will. It is the aggravation of having a government so blind and uncaring about their peoples needs that they don't even feel like it's necessary to go through the motions or put up an act. And it's the deaths. The thousands of dead and dying, with Bush sitting there smirking and lying about progress and winning in a country where every single Iraqi outside of the Green Zone is losing.

Once again... The timing of all of this is impeccable- two days before congressional elections. And if you don't see it, then I'm sorry, you're stupid. Let's see how many times Bush milks this as a 'success' in his coming speeches.

A final note. I just read somewhere that some of the families of dead American soldiers are visiting the Iraqi north to see 'what their sons and daughters died for'. If that's the

goal of the visit, then, “Ladies and gentlemen- to your right is the Iraqi Ministry of Oil, to your left is the Dawry refinery... Each of you get this, a gift bag containing a 3 by 3 color [sic] poster of Al Sayid Muqtada Al Sadr (Long May He Live And Prosper), an Ayatollah Sistani t-shirt and a map of Iran, to scale, redrawn with the Islamic Republic of South Iraq. Also... Hey you! You- the female in the back- is that a lock of hair I see? Cover it up or stay home.”

And that is what they died for.

- posted by river @ 8:25 PM

Friday, December 29, 2006

End of Another Year...

You know your country is in trouble when:

1. The UN has to open a special branch just to keep track of the chaos and bloodshed, UNAMI.
2. Abovementioned [sic] branch cannot be run from your country.
3. The politicians who worked to put your country in this sorry state can no longer be found inside of, or anywhere near, its borders.
4. The only thing the US and Iran can agree about is the deteriorating state of your nation.
5. An 8-year war and 13-year blockade are looking like the country's 'Golden Years'.
6. Your country is purportedly 'selling' 2 million barrels of oil a day, but you are standing in line for 4 hours for black market gasoline for the generator.
7. For every 5 hours of no electricity, you get one hour of public electricity and then the government announces it's going to cut back on providing that hour.
8. Politicians who supported the war spend tv time debating whether it is 'sectarian bloodshed' or 'civil war'.
9. People consider themselves lucky if they can actually identify the corpse of the relative that's been missing for two weeks.

A day in the life of the average Iraqi has been reduced to identifying corpses, avoiding car bombs and attempting to keep track of which family members have been detained, which ones have been exiled and which ones have been abducted.

2006 has been, decidedly, the worst year yet. No- really. The magnitude of this war and occupation is only now hitting the country full force. It's like having a big piece of hard, dry earth you are determined to break apart. You drive in the first stake in the form of an infrastructure damaged with missiles and the newest in arms technology, the first cracks begin to form. Several smaller stakes come in the form of politicians like Chalabi, Al Hakim, Talbani, Pachachi, Allawi and Maliki. The cracks slowly begin to multiply and stretch across the once solid piece of earth, reaching out towards its edges like so many skeletal hands. And you apply pressure. You surround it from all sides and push and pull. Slowly, but surely, it begins coming apart- a chip here, a chunk there.

That is Iraq right now. The Americans have done a fine job of working to break it apart. This last year has nearly everyone convinced that that was the plan right from the start. There were too many blunders for them to actually have been, simply, blunders. The 'mistakes' were too catastrophic. The people the Bush administration chose to support and promote were openly and publicly terrible- from the conman and embezzler Chalabi, to the terrorist Jaffari, to the militia man Maliki. The decisions, like disbanding the Iraqi army, abolishing the original constitution, and allowing militias to take over Iraqi security were too damaging to be anything but intentional.

The question now is, but why? I really have been asking myself that these last few days. What does America possibly gain by damaging Iraq to this extent? I'm certain only raving idiots still believe this war and occupation were about WMD or an actual fear of Saddam.

Al Qaeda? That's laughable. Bush has effectively created more terrorists in Iraq these last 4 years than Osama could have created in 10 different terrorist camps in the distant hills of Afghanistan. Our children now play games of 'sniper' and 'jihadi', pretending that one hit an American soldier between the eyes and this one overturned a Humvee.

This last year especially has been a turning point. Nearly every Iraqi has lost so much. *So much*. There's no way to describe the loss we've experienced with this war and occupation. There are no words to relay the feelings that come with the knowledge that daily almost 40 corpses are found in different states of decay and mutilation. There is no compensation for the dense, black cloud of fear that hangs over the head of every Iraqi. Fear of things so out of ones hands, it borders on the ridiculous- like whether your name is 'too Sunni' or 'too Shia'. Fear of the larger things- like the Americans in the tank, the police patrolling your area in black bandanas [sic] and green banners, and the Iraqi soldiers wearing black masks at the checkpoint.

Again, I can't help but ask myself why this was all done? What was the point of breaking Iraq so that it was beyond repair? Iran seems to be the only gainer. Their presence in Iraq is so well-established, publicly criticizing a cleric or ayatollah verges on suicide. Has the situation gone so beyond America that it is now irretrievable? Or was this a part of the plan all along? My head aches just posing the questions.

What has me most puzzled right now is: why add fuel to the fire? Sunnis and moderate Shia are being chased out of the larger cities in the south and the capital. Baghdad is

being torn apart with Shia leaving Sunni areas and Sunnis leaving Shia areas- some under threat and some in fear of attacks. People are being openly shot at check points or in drive by killings... Many colleges have stopped classes. Thousands of Iraqis no longer send their children to school- it's just not safe.

Why make things worse by insisting on Saddam's execution now? Who gains if they hang Saddam? Iran, naturally, but who else? There is a real fear that this execution will be the final blow that will shatter Iraq. Some Sunni and Shia tribes have threatened to arm their members against the Americans if Saddam is executed. Iraqis in general are watching closely to see what happens next, and quietly preparing for the worst.

This is because now, Saddam no longer represents himself or his regime. Through the constant insistence of American war propaganda, Saddam is now representative of all Sunni Arabs (never mind most of his government were Shia). The Americans, through their speeches and news articles and Iraqi Puppets, have made it very clear that they consider him to personify Sunni Arab resistance to the occupation. Basically, with this execution, what the Americans are saying is "Look- Sunni Arabs- this is your man, we all know this. We're hanging him- he symbolizes you." And make no mistake about it, this trial and verdict and execution are 100% American. Some of the actors were Iraqi enough, but the production, direction and montage was pure Hollywood (though low-budget, if you ask me).

That is, of course, why Talbani doesn't want to sign his death penalty- not because the mob man suddenly grew a conscience, but because he doesn't want to be the one who does the hanging- he won't be able to travel far away enough if he does that.

Maliki's government couldn't contain their glee. They announced the ratification of the execution order before the actual court did. A few nights ago, some American news program interviewed Maliki's bureau chief, Basim Al-Hassani who was speaking in accented American English about the upcoming execution like it was a carnival he'd be attending. He sat, looking sleazy and not a little bit ridiculous, his dialogue interspersed with 'gonna', 'gotta' and 'wanna'... Which happens, I suppose, when the only people you mix with are American soldiers.

My only conclusion is that the Americans want to withdraw from Iraq, but would like to leave behind a full-fledged civil war because it wouldn't look good if they withdraw and things actually begin to improve, would it?

Here we come to the end of 2006 and I am sad. Not simply sad for the state of the country, but for the state of our humanity, as Iraqis. We've all lost some of the compassion and civility that I felt made us special four years ago. I take myself as an example. Nearly four years ago, I cringed every time I heard about the death of an American soldier. They were occupiers, but they were humans also and the knowledge that they were being killed in my country gave me sleepless nights. Never mind they crossed oceans to attack the country, I actually felt for them.

Had I not chronicled those feelings of agitation in this very blog, I wouldn't believe them now. Today, they simply represent numbers. 3000 Americans dead over nearly four years? Really? That's the number of dead Iraqis in less than a month. The Americans had families? Too bad. So do we. So do the corpses in the streets and the ones waiting for identification in the morgue.

Is the American soldier that died today in Anbar more important than a cousin I have who was shot last month on the night of his engagement to a woman he's wanted to marry for the last six years? I don't think so.

Just because Americans die in smaller numbers, it doesn't make them more significant, does it?

- posted by river @ 1:00 PM

Sunday, December 31, 2006

A Lynching...

It's official. Maliki and his people are psychopaths. This really is a new low. It's outrageous- an execution during Eid. Muslims all over the world (with the exception of Iran) are outraged. Eid is a time of peace, of putting aside quarrels and anger- at least for the duration of Eid.

This does not bode well for the coming year. No one imagined the madmen would actually do it during a religious holiday. It is religiously unacceptable and before, it was constitutionally illegal. We thought we'd at least get a few days of peace and some time to enjoy the Eid holiday, which coincides with the New Year this year. We've spent the first two days of a holy holiday watching bits and pieces of a sordid lynching.

America the savior [sic]... After nearly four years and Bush's biggest achievement in Iraq has been a lynching. Bravo Americans.

Maliki has made the mistake of his life. His signature and unhidden glee at the whole execution, especially on the first day of Eid Al Adha (the Eid where millions of Muslims make a pilgrimage to Mecca), will only do more to damage his already tattered reputation. He's like a vulture in a suit (or a balding weasel). It's almost embarrassing. I kept expecting Muwafaq Al Rubaii to run over and wipe the drool from the corner of his mouth as he signed for the execution. Are these the people who represent the New Iraq? We're in so much more trouble than I ever thought.

And no- not the celebrations BBC are claiming. With the exception of a few areas, the streets are empty.

Now we come to CNN. Shame on you CNN journalists- you're getting lazy. The least you can do is get the last words correct when you write a story about an execution. Your articles are read the world over and will go down in history as references. You people are the biggest news network in the world- the least you can do is spend some money on a decent translator. Saddam's last words were NOT "Muqtada Al Sadr" as Munir Haddad claimed, according to the article below. If anyone had seen at least part of the video they showed on TV, you'd know that.

"A witness, Iraqi Judge Munir Haddad, said that one of the executioners told Hussein that the former dictator had destroyed Iraq, which sparked an argument that was joined by several government officials in the room.

As a noose was tightened around Hussein's neck, one of the executioners yelled "long live Muqtada al-Sadr," Haddad said, referring to the powerful anti-American Shiite religious leader.

Hussein, a Sunni, uttered one last phrase before he died, saying "Muqtada al-Sadr" in a mocking tone, according to Haddad's account."

From the video that was leaked, it was not an executioner who yelled "long live Muqtada al-Sadr". See, this is another low the Maliki government sunk to- they had

some hecklers conveniently standing by during the execution. Maliki claimed they were "some witnesses from the trial", but they were, very obviously, hecklers. The moment the noose was around Saddam's neck, they began chanting, in unison, "God's prayers be on Mohamed and on Mohamed's family..." Something else I didn't quite catch (but it was very coordinated), and then "Muqtada, Muqtada, Muqtada!" One of them called out to Saddam, "Go to hell..." (in Arabic). Saddam looked down disdainfully and answered "Heya hay il marjala...?" which is basically saying, "Is this your manhood...?".

Someone half-heartedly called out to the hecklers, "I beg you, I beg you- the man is being executed!" They were slightly quieter and then Saddam stood and said, "Ashadu an la ilaha ila Allah, wa ashhadu ana Mohammedun rasool Allah..." Which means, "I witness there is no god but Allah and that Mohammed is His messenger." These are the words a Muslim (Sunnis and Shia alike) should say on their deathbed. He repeated this one more time, very clearly, but before he could finish it, he was lynched.

So, no, CNN, his last words were not "Muqtada Al Sadr" in a mocking tone- just thought someone should clear that up. (Really people, six of you contributed to that article!)

Then again, one could argue that it was a judge who gave them that false information. A judge on the Iraqi appeals court- one of the judges who ratified the execution order. Everyone knows Iraqi judges under American tutelage never lie- that explains CNN's confusion.

Muwafaq Al Rubai was said he was "weak and frightened". Apparently, Rubai saw a different lynching because according to the video they leaked, he didn't look frightened at all. His voice didn't shake and he refused to put on the black hood. He looked resigned to his fate, and during the heckling he looked as defiant as ever. (It's quite a contrast to Muhsin Abdul Hameed's public hysterics last year when the Americans raided his home.)

It's one thing to have militias participating in killings. This is allegedly the democracy the Americans flaunt. Is this how bloodthirsty and frightening we've become? Is this what Iraq stands for now? Executions? I'm sure the rest of the Arab countries will be impressed.

One of the most advanced countries in the world did not help to reconstruct Iraq, they didn't even help produce a decent constitution. They did, however, contribute nicely to a kangaroo court and a lynching. A lynching shall go down in history as America's biggest accomplishment in Iraq. So who's next? Who hangs for the hundreds of thousands who've died as a direct result of this war and occupation? Bush? Blair? Maliki? Jaffari? Allawi? Chalabi?

2006 has definitely been representative of Maliki and his government- killings like never before and a lynching to end it properly. Death and destruction everywhere. I'm so tired of all of this...

- posted by river @ 10:12 PM