

The War of the Ghosts

Here in Kirkuk huddled in our hotel rooms at night - we hear the rocket and mortar attacks against the American Air Base at the edge of the city. There is a crump-crump-crump of the bombs, followed by the wail of sirens. Then silence. There is a war of ghosts going on in this city. Everyday there are fresh attacks against civilians or the US Army. But few people dare talk in the press about who could possibly have caused them. Thursday afternoon - talking to the weary police officers of the Rahimawa station. They had just found a 3 kilogram bomb hidden in a desk at the local school. It was set to blow up at 8.30 a.m. - when most of the children would be at the school. It was not their first experience of terrorism: last month the officers saw their friends and colleagues burn to death after a suicide bomber hit their station. "What can I say?" asked Adel Abdul Ibrahim the Chief of Police. "After the explosion, I walked outside. And I saw my friend who had just dropped me off in his car. He was burning alive. Ten yards away was a car with three other of my friends also burning alive. The car of the bomber was on fire and his body was scattered all over the yard. So what can I say? What can I possibly say?" What he, evidently, cannot say is who could have perpetrated the bombing. The candidates are too many. The situation here too fraught for unguarded public comment. Each comment has possible repercussions and not always pleasant. Take the case of Mr. Agar al-Tawil. A few weeks ago Mr. Al-Tawil appeared on the local Kirkuk TV station. He spoke his mind. A few days later three men waited outside his home. When he appeared they shot him with a burst of machine gun fire. Another day in Kirkuk. Another funeral. And another murder with a plenty of suspects. Here is a list of all the possible groups in Kirkuk that would possibly kill a policeman, or a politician or bomb a school or attach explosives to their followers to kill other people. There are the Peshmerguas of the Kurds. They are the victorious army that a la Northern Alliance stormed into Kirkuk last year to chase away the remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime. They now want to own the oil riches of Kirkuk and overturn thirty years of ethnic cleansing from the city. Everyday more and more Kurds come down from the mountains to set up house on the fringes of the city. Everyday the tensions between them and their erstwhile ethnic cleansers - the Iraqi Arabs grows. On the side of the Arabs are the Turcomans - an anachronistic strand of the old Ottoman Empire several hundred thousand strong. They were left stranded on the wrong side of the border by an 80-year old treaty, and they deeply resent the Kurdish influx. The Turkish government has given groups with the community guns and supports them as a way of destabilizing the Kurds who have independent aspirations in southern Turkey. There is also a small Christian minority who tries to attach itself to whichever group is strongest. Of course, each of these groups is riven with a myriad of smaller factions who loathe each other almost as much as they hate the other ethnic groups. Think clans and tribes of the Scottish highlands of the 18th century with their blood feuds and internecine battles and you have an idea of the system here. To add to the confusion there is a growing Islamic movement among all the ethnic groups. So now some of the Kurds and Arabs define themselves both by religion and ethnicity. But the two groups responsible for most of the killings are the

ultra hard line Islamic extremists and the former Ba'athists. It is a good bet that any suicide bombers are the responsibility of the survivors of Answar Islam. A quasi-cult that was chased out of the Kurdish mountains by the American Air Force. However, most of the drive by killings and bombings are the responsibility of the former Ba'athists who divide the Iraqi Arabs. In the Sunni triangle they control most of the people. And up here they can still influence large sections of the Arab population into doing what they want.

****Friday – to the funeral of a too young Christian police officer. He had lived in a Muslim neighbourhood and someone – no one knows who – had betrayed him. Gunmen fired a machine gun into him as he walked home from the station. The church was filled with the screams and cries of friends and relatives. Most were older than he had been when he died. His father stood beside the coffin. His eyes glassy with grief. His face stiff with the enormity of the loss.****The security situation effects westerners working in Iraq. One of the joys of travelling as a freelancer is staying in cheap hotels. I am not being ironic. What they can lack in cleanliness, they often make up in friendliness and good contacts. Sitting in a lobby drinking cups of tea and kibitzing with people who actually live and work in the community is an invaluable source of information. In Baghdad last April after the fall of the city – the hotel manager knew the best way to travel north and which check points were set up by the Iranian Mujahadeen Al Haq. In contrast, the American intelligence officer who briefed me said with a wry smile: “Iraq is a big country, and we simply do not know what is out there.” But now some of those hotels are closed to westerners. After the wave of bombings of hotels in early March – it is considered by many people to be too dangerous. It was the fear in the eyes that was the give away. “Sorry, sir. What country are you from?” said the hotel manager nervously shifting papers in his hand. “Canada. Why do you ask?” “Oh sorry sir. We are all full up.” “What? Full up?” I eyed the racks of keys indicating empty rooms behind him. “Yes sir, completely full up. Very sorry. Now you must go.” It was the same story at the next hotel. Except there – they were much more explicit: “We are afraid. But we cannot risk having any foreigners here.” Now settled in a back room of a hotel off the main street of Kirkuk. It takes a certain act of courage on the part of the owners. In July – when their rooms were full of Kellogg, Brown and Root oil workers – four men stood across the street and fired a bazooka into the first floor. It must be difficult being a KBR worker in Iraq – last night to the Art Deco ballroom of the Baba Club in the compound of the North State Oil Company. It was built fifty years ago by the British oil executives. The club has a swimming pool, a golf course and, now, a hole in the bar where two months ago someone – again no one knows who – left a bomb to detonate when the KBR workers were there. The KBR workers took the message and moved onto the air base. Nor is it only hotels that are at risk. In the last few weeks, the list of foreigners killed by drive by shootings, or car bombs grows everyday. It is part of a strategically brilliant plan; akin to the IRA tactics post the 1916 uprising in Ireland. Every person who works with the foreigners is a target. Every link to the outside world is attacked as a way of creating confusion, chaos and fear. Khaled Aziz works as a translator and guide, “My friends tell me all the time. Don't work with foreigner it is too dangerous.” I have worked with Khaled for several weeks. He is an honest and decent man. But I have never been to his house for a cup of tea which given Iraqi hospitality is very strange. “My

father will not let me. He is not against foreigners.” Says Khaled, “It is just that he is afraid of what the neighbours will say. If they see me with foreigners they will say I am working with them and they might do something bad to me.” **Do the Iraqis like the Americans? It depends on the ethnic grouping. The Kurds love George Bush. There should be a plan in some Republican electoral strategy office to have Kurdistan declared part of Florida. Bush would sweep the state. The other parts of the country are more divided. In the Sunni triangle anti-Americanism rules. Not because of loyalty to Saddam Hussein, but because they have little stake in the new Iraq. The biggest mistake Paul Bremer did was to disband the Iraqi Army. Hundreds of thousands of men who had chosen not to fight were suddenly out of work. The worst hit were the cities of Falluja, Mosul and Ramadi. They were the main recruiting grounds of old the officer corps. The scenes you see on your television screens are a direct result of that decision. Unemployment feeds the resistance and until the Americans can solve this problem the nightly attacks on the air base will go on. And the situation for everyone here will continue to be unsafe.