

# Letter from Baghdad

Farnaz Fassihi, *Wall Street Journal*



## IT'S TIME TO FACE THE TRUTH

The White House would have us believe all is going well in Baghdad. Here is the truth, from a private communication to a friend by Wall Street Journal reporter Farnaz Fassihi:

Being a foreign correspondent in Baghdad these days is like being under virtual house arrest. Forget about the reasons that lured me to this job: a chance to see the world, explore the exotic, meet new people in far away lands, discover their ways and tell stories that could make a difference.

Little by little, day-by-day, being based in Iraq has defied all those reasons. I am house bound. I leave when I have a very good reason to and a scheduled interview. I avoid going to people's homes and never walk in the streets. I can't go grocery shopping any more, can't eat in restaurants, can't strike a conversation with strangers, can't look for stories, can't drive in any thing but a full armored car, can't go to scenes of breaking news stories, can't be stuck in traffic, can't speak English outside, can't take a road trip, can't say I'm an American, can't linger at checkpoints, can't be curious about what people are saying, doing, feeling. And can't and can't. There has been one too many close calls, including a car bomb so near our house that it blew out all the windows. So now my most pressing concern every day is not to write a kick-ass story but to stay alive and make sure our Iraqi employees stay alive. In Baghdad I am a security personnel first, a reporter second.

It's hard to pinpoint when the 'turning point' exactly began. Was it April when the Fallujah fell out of the grasp of the Americans? Was it when Moqtada and Jish Mahdi declared war on the U.S. military? Was it when Sadr City, home to ten percent of Iraq's population, became a nightly battlefield for the Americans? Or was it when the insurgency began spreading from isolated pockets in the Sunni triangle to include most of Iraq? Despite President Bush's rosy assessments, Iraq remains a disaster. If under Saddam it was a 'potential' threat, under the Americans it has been transformed to 'imminent and active threat,' a foreign policy failure bound to haunt the United States for decades to come.

Iraqis like to call this mess 'the situation.' When asked 'how are things?' they reply: 'the situation is very bad.'

What they mean by situation is this: the Iraqi government doesn't control most Iraqi cities, there are several car bombs going off each day around the country killing and injuring scores of innocent people, the country's roads are becoming impassable and littered by hundreds of landmines and explosive devices aimed to kill American soldiers; there are assassinations,

kidnappings and beheadings. The situation, basically, means a raging barbaric guerilla war. In four days, 110 people died and over 300 injured in Baghdad alone. The numbers are so shocking that the Ministry of Health—which was attempting an exercise of public transparency by releasing the numbers—has now stopped disclosing them.

Insurgents now attack Americans 87 times a day.

A friend drove thru the Shiite slum of Sadr City yesterday. He said young men were openly placing improvised explosive devices into the ground. They melt a shallow hole into the asphalt, dig the explosive, cover it with dirt and put an old tire or plastic can over it to signal to the locals this is booby-trapped. He said on the main roads of Sadr City, there were a dozen landmines per every ten yards. His car snaked and swirled to avoid driving over them. Behind the walls sits an angry Iraqi ready to detonate them as soon as an American convoy gets near. This is in Shiite land, the population that was supposed to love America for liberating Iraq.

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wave of abduction and kidnappings. Only two weeks ago we felt safe around Baghdad because foreigners were being abducted on the roads and highways between towns. Then came a frantic phone call from a journalist female friend at 11 p.m. telling me two Italian women had been abducted from their homes in broad daylight. Then the two Americans and Brit, who got beheaded, were abducted

from their homes in a residential neighborhood. They were supplying the entire block with round the clock electricity from their generator to win friends. The abductors grabbed one of them at 6 a.m. when he came out to switch on the generator; his beheaded body was thrown back near the neighborhoods.

The insurgency, we are told, is rampant with no signs of calming down. If any thing, it is growing stronger, organized and more sophisticated every day. The various elements within it—Baathists, criminals, nationalists and Al Qaeda—are cooperating and coordinating.

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I went to an emergency meeting for foreign correspondents with the military and embassy to discuss the kidnappings. We were somberly told our fate would largely depend on where we were in the kidnapping chain once it was determined we were missing. Here is how it goes: criminal gangs grab you and sell you up to Baathists in Fallujah, who will in turn sell you to Al Qaeda. In turn, cash and weapons flow the other way from Al Qaeda to the Baathists to the criminals. My friend Georges, the French journalist snatched on the road to Najaf, has been missing for a month with no word on release or whether he is still alive.

America's last hope for a quick exit? The Iraqi police and National Guard units we are spending billions of dollars to train. The cops are being murdered by the dozens every day - over 700 to date—and the insurgents are infiltrating their ranks. The problem is so serious that the U.S. military has allocated \$6 million dollars to buy out 30,000 cops they just trained to get rid of them quietly.

As for reconstruction: firstly it's so unsafe for foreigners to operate that almost all projects have come to a halt. After two years, of the \$18 billion Congress appropriated for Iraq reconstruction only about \$1 billion or so has been spent and a large chunk has now been reallocated for improving security, a sign of just how bad things are going here.

Oil dreams? Insurgents disrupt oil flow routinely as a result of sabotage and oil prices

have hit record high of over \$50 a barrel. Who did this war exactly benefit? Was it worth it? Are we safer because Saddam is in prison and Al Qaeda is running around in Iraq?

Iraqis say that thanks to America they got freedom in exchange for insecurity. Guess what? They say they'd take security over freedom any day, even if it means having a dictator ruler.

I heard an educated Iraqi say today that if Saddam Hussein were allowed to run for elections he would get the majority of the vote. This is truly sad.

Then I went to see an Iraqi scholar this week to talk to him about elections here. He has been trying to educate the public on the importance of voting. He said, "President Bush wanted to turn Iraq into a democracy that would be an example for the Middle East. Forget about democracy, forget about being a model for the region; we have to salvage Iraq before all is lost."

One could argue that Iraq is already lost beyond salvation. For those of us on the ground it's hard to imagine what if any thing could salvage it from its violent downward spiral. The genie of terrorism, chaos and mayhem has been unleashed onto this country as a result of American mistakes and it can't be put back into a bottle.

The Iraqi government is talking about having elections in three months while half of the country remains a 'no go zone'—out of the hands of the government and the Americans and out of reach of journalists. In the other half, the disenchanted population is too terrified to show up at polling stations. The Sunnis have already said they'd boycott elections, leaving the stage open for polarized government of Kurds and Shiites that will not be deemed as legitimate and will most certainly lead to civil war.

I asked a 28-year-old engineer if he and his family would participate in the Iraqi elections since it was the first time Iraqis could to some degree elect a leadership. His response summed it all: "Go and vote and risk being blown into pieces or followed by the insurgents and murdered for cooperating with the Americans? For what? To practice democracy? Are you joking?"

-Farnaz

It's time to end the occupation, take our troops out of harms way and, most important, on November 2<sup>nd</sup> get rid of the incompetents who created this mess. The modern day "Battle of Algiers" has been won by the people of Iraq and the longer U.S. troops stay, the worse it will get for all.