

UNCLASSIFIED - EOUO

Asia Times Online  
October 28, 2003

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### Every Time The Wind Blows, Part 3

## The Locals

By Nir Rosen, with the US 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Iraq

AL-QAIM, western Iraq - Ayman Aftam, a portly young customs office manager on the Iraqi al-Huseiba border with Syria, owes his position and salary to the American soldiers of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) who took control of the western region of Iraq and re-established a customs service, in addition to police.

He explains that World Food Program rations are smuggled from Iraq and sold in Syrian markets. Cooking oil, sold at 1,500 dinars (less than US\$1) for five liters in Iraq, costs the equivalent of 6,000 dinars in Syria. Smuggling weapons from Iraq to Syria is also common. "Everything is so cheap here," he says. "Rocket-propelled grenade [RPG] launchers, grenades which cost about 2,000 dinars, even the engines from abandoned Iraqi fighter planes. Syrian traders load their trucks full of weapons from the local arms markets to take back." Iraqis smuggle benzene out of the country into Syria by building large tanks beneath their cars and raising the chassis.

Aftam, 26, who studied law at Baghdad University, saw hundreds of foreign mujahideen, or holy fighters, enter Iraq through the al-Qaim crossing before the war. "We welcomed them because they were here to defend our country," he says. As for the Americans, "We don't welcome them. They are occupying forces. We haven't seen anything good from them, only an occupation." He conceals his resentment from the American soldiers he cooperates with, but in Arabic he demands, "Why do they come with their Bradleys in front of our houses, and put their boots on our people's heads? Why don't they wave back when our children wave to them? They just keep their guns pointed at us." Aftam also refers to the many innocent people he claims the Americans have killed, including a man who drove up to their checkpoint but did not understand the instructions and was shot.

Ayman maintains, like most Iraqis, that "the fighters are not Saddam [Hussein] loyalists - those were killed in the war. There are only very few mujahideen here. We don't want mujahideen here. We accepted them when they were defending Iraq; now Saddam is gone. We gave the Americans an opportunity to help Iraq. The people attacking are just normal Iraqis angry at Americans."

"They hate us," soldiers often say about the Iraqis they believe they liberated. In the town of Huseiba, 25 kilometers from the 3rd ACR's Tiger Base, it is not viewed as a liberation. "Any night we go there we get shot at," says Captain Chris Alfeiri. Huseiba's 150,000 residents live comfortable lives, benefiting from a thriving centuries-old smuggling route as well as the normal trade of a border town. Large mansions owned by successful smugglers and tribal leaders sit on the fertile river banks.

Huseiba's market street is crowded with stalls selling vegetables, cows, radios and, more discreetly, AK-47 assault rifles, grenades and RPGs, Russian grenade launchers. Seated outside a cafe by the Great Mosque of al-Qaim, one young man who works as a trader is willing to admit "the American occupation is better

than the old regime". His friend disagrees. "This is an occupation. They don't respect civilians, they laugh at us and insult us."

The man answers: "It's true that the Americans give us more freedom, but they don't respect us, searching our houses and treating us improperly." The owner of the cafe interjects angrily, "We have no dignity now because of American soldiers. We are very angry that American soldiers don't respect civilians. Now we are all mujahideen. Any man who can't fight will give his money to fighters. Even Saddam was better to us and gave us more respect." A passer-by agrees: "It's not freedom, it's an occupation."

Sheikh Mudhafar Abdel Wahab Alani can be heard giving a sermon to his congregation of 1,200 devout from the city's biggest mosque. The 40-year-old religious leader berates his audience for what he says is their sinful behavior since the foreigners occupied their country. Loudspeakers atop the mosque make his furious opprobrium audible throughout the city. As he completes his *khutba*, or sermon, and the noon prayer ends, he emerges wearing a white robe and white turban, a thick black beard on his reddish brown face and an aquiline nose defining his distinguished features. He walks swiftly past the departing devout, smiling, greeting passers-by warmly and wishing everyone peace and God's blessings, and he is happy to share his views with a stranger.

"We reject this occupation, as I said in many of my sermons," he begins. "No country would accept an occupation. We have lost our dignity." Of the Americans he says, "Until now we have not seen anything ... except killing, searches and curfews. There is a reaction for every action. If you are choking me, I will also choke you. We have a resistance just like the Palestinians, Chechens and Afghans." When asked whether the Americans should leave soon, he snaps, "They should leave today." The Americans have done nothing to improve life, he said, so "how could it get any worse? It has never been so bad."

Sheikh Mudhafar says one word explains the attacks against American soldiers, *intikam*, or "revenge". "Revenge is a common tradition in Iraq," he says. "It was the same between Iraqis before the Americans arrived. The attacks are the reaction to the Americans. Revenge for their actions." He rejects US claims that there is no popular support for the Iraqi resistance. "I don't think there is al-Qaeda in Iraq, and Saddam's supporters are too cowardly to attack the Americans." He is not opposed to the anti-American attacks. "I do not tell my people not to attack the Americans."

In the nearby town of Ubeidi, 20km from Huseiba, Sheikh Mudhafar's close friend Sheikh Kamal Shafiq Ali, leader of the Mustafa mosque and its congregation of 1,000, has completed his sermon as well. The jovial sheikh also dons a white robe, as well as a white cap, and his clipped white beard makes him look older than his 45 years. Sheikh Kamal explains that there are three attitudes to the US presence. "Most people don't care if the US or Saddam is in place. Some people are with the occupation because they want to achieve freedom, and some, very few, are against the occupation."

Sheikh Kamal says Iraq's religious leaders "said we have to wait" and give the Americans a chance to fulfill their promises before attacking them. "No country wants an occupation," he says. "The Koran says that Allah promised the believers that infidels will never rule them. Of course it is an occupation, it is in the UN resolution that it is an occupation. But if Saddam doesn't return and the Americans keep their promises, it is a liberation."

Sheikh Kamal certainly prefers American soldiers to fellow Muslim or Arab soldiers, saying that "Americans are more kind than Arab or Muslim soldiers would be". Of course, even Sheikh Kamal is not extending his country's hospitality indefinitely. "A government must be established, security must be provided, there have to be elections and a constitution, and after they finish all that, they have to get out, as they promised," he admonishes. He will be hard pressed to find any American who wants to stay.