

# Seen through a Syrian lens, 'unknown Americans' are provoking civil war in Iraq

By Robert Fisk - 28 April 2006

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<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article12885.htm>

In Syria, the world appears through a glass, darkly. As dark as the smoked windows of the car which takes me to a building on the western side of Damascus where a man I have known for 15 years - we shall call him a "security source", which is the name given by American correspondents to their own powerful intelligence officers - waits with his own ferocious narrative of disaster in Iraq and dangers in the Middle East.

His is a fearful portrait of an America trapped in the bloody sands of Iraq, desperately trying to provoke a civil war around Baghdad in order to reduce its own military casualties. It is a scenario in which Saddam Hussein remains Washington's best friend, in which Syria has struck at the Iraqi insurgents with a ruthlessness that the United States wilfully ignores. And in which Syria's Interior Minister, found shot dead in his office last year, committed suicide because of his own mental instability.

The Americans, my interlocutor suspected, are trying to provoke an Iraqi civil war so that Sunni Muslim insurgents spend their energies killing their Shia co-religionists rather than soldiers of the Western occupation forces. "I swear to you that we have very good information," my source says, finger stabbing the air in front of him. "One young Iraqi man told us that he was trained by the Americans as a policeman in Baghdad and he spent 70 per cent of his time learning to drive and 30 per cent in weapons training. They said to him: 'Come back in a week.' When he went back, they gave him a mobile phone and told him to drive into a crowded area near a mosque and phone them. He waited in the car but couldn't get the right mobile signal. So he got out of the car to where he received a better signal. Then his car blew up."

Impossible, I think to myself. But then I remember how many times Iraqis in Baghdad have told me similar stories. These reports are believed even if they seem unbelievable. And I know where much of the Syrian information is gleaned: from the tens of thousands of Shia Muslim pilgrims who come to pray at the Sayda Zeinab mosque outside Damascus. These men and women come from the slums of Baghdad, Hillah and Iskandariyah as well as the cities of Najaf and Basra. Sunnis from Fallujah and Ramadi also visit Damascus to see friends and relatives and talk freely of American tactics in Iraq.

"There was another man, trained by the Americans for the police. He too was given a mobile and told to drive to an area where there was a crowd - maybe a protest - and to call them and tell them what was happening. Again, his new mobile was not working. So he went to a landline phone and called the Americans and told them: 'Here I am, in the place you sent me and I can tell you what's happening here.' And at that moment there was a big explosion in his car."

Just who these "Americans" might be, my source did not say. In the anarchic and panic-stricken world of Iraq, there are many US groups - including countless outfits supposedly working for the American military and the new Western-backed Iraqi Interior Ministry - who operate outside any laws or rules. No one can account for the murder of 191 university teachers and professors since the 2003 invasion - nor the fact that more than 50 former Iraqi fighter-bomber pilots who attacked Iran in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war have been assassinated in their home towns in Iraq in the past three years.

Amid this chaos, a colleague of my source asked me, how could Syria be expected to lessen the number of attacks on Americans inside Iraq? "It was never safe, our border," he said. "During Saddam's time, criminals and Saddam's terrorists crossed our borders to attack our government. I built a wall of earth and sand along the border at that time. But three car bombs from Saddam's agents exploded in Damascus and Tartous- I was the one who captured the criminals responsible. But we couldn't stop them."

Now, he told me, the rampart running for hundreds of miles along Syria's border with Iraq had been heightened. "I have had barbed wire put on top and up to now we have caught 1,500 non-Syrian and

non-Iraqi Arabs trying to cross and we have stopped 2,700 Syrians from crossing ... Our army is there - but the Iraqi army and the Americans are not there on the other side."

Behind these grave suspicions in Damascus lies the memory of Saddam's long friendship with the United States. "Our Hafez el-Assad [the former Syrian president who died in 2000] learnt that Saddam, in his early days, met with American officials 20 times in four weeks. This convinced Assad that, in his words, 'Saddam is with the Americans'. Saddam was the biggest helper of the Americans in the Middle East (when he attacked Iran in 1980) after the fall of the Shah. And he still is! After all, he brought the Americans to Iraq!"

So I turn to a story which is more distressing for my sources: the death by shooting of Brigadier General Ghazi Kenaan, former head of Syrian military intelligence in Lebanon - an awesomely powerful position - and Syrian Minister of Interior when his suicide was announced by the Damascus government last year.

Widespread rumours outside Syria suggested that Kenaan was suspected by UN investigators of involvement in the murder of the former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri in a massive car bomb in Beirut last year - and that he had been "suicided" by Syrian government agents to prevent him telling the truth.

Not so, insisted my original interlocutor. "General Ghazi was a man who believed he could give orders and anything he wanted would happen. Something happened that he could not reconcile - something that made him realise he was not all-powerful. On the day of his death, he went to his office at the Interior Ministry and then he left and went home for half an hour. Then he came back with a pistol. He left a message for his wife in which he said goodbye to her and asked her to look after their children and he said that what he was going to do was 'for the good of Syria'. Then he shot himself in the mouth."

Of Hariri's assassination, Syrian officials like to recall his relationship with the former Iraqi interim prime minister Iyad Alawi - a self-confessed former agent for the CIA and MI6 - and an alleged \$20bn arms deal between the Russians and Saudi Arabia in which they claim Hariri was involved.

Hariri's Lebanese supporters continue to dismiss the Syrian argument on the grounds that Syria had identified Hariri as the joint author with his friend, French President Jacques Chirac, of the UN Security Council resolution which demanded the retreat of the Syrians from Lebanese territory.

But if the Syrians are understandably obsessed with the American occupation of Iraq, their long hatred for Saddam - something which they shared with most Iraqis - is still intact. When I asked my first "security" source what would happen to the former Iraqi dictator, he replied, banging his fist into his hand: "He will be killed. He will be killed. He will be killed."

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