

Back in Baghdad where guy on a mobile may be dialing your killer

by Robert Fisk, 12 August 2005

It was the same lunatic corkscrew landing in the same little Lebanese plane, barrelling down into the sandstorm of Baghdad airport. Piloting his 20-passenger twin-prop aircraft – from Flying Carpet Airlines, no less – Captain Hussam has three things on his mind: American helicopters, pilotless reconnaissance drones and incoming missiles. So we all scan the dun-coloured runway and terminals and the grotty slums beside the airport road for the tell-tale pink flame surviving pilots have sometimes caught sight of.

But we landed safely and a scruffy bus took us to the terminal where I bid the customs officer Salaam Aleikum and he cheerfully asked me if I was a Muslim. “English,” I replied, which seemed to be good enough to him. He couldn’t break the airline security string on my bag so he waved me through. Then there came The Airport Road. We all need to put this in capitals these days. As my Iraqi fixer put it very well: “It’s really just a matter of luck.” Sometimes you glide safely across to the city, sometimes you get caught up in a firefight, sometimes – like poor Marla Ruzicka, the American girl who tried to count casualties – you are too close to a suicide attack. “I’m alive,” she cried just before she died.

So we concentrate very hard on The Airport Road. The Americans have put a squadron of Bradley Fighting Vehicles on the central reservation and Iraqi army units on each side of the highway. But they still get

bombed. “The Iraqi army’s a joke,” an American computer salesman in Baghdad tells me. “It was the Iraqi army which kidnapped me near Nasiriyah. They tried to sell me to the insurgents for \$10,000. Then one of my employees came and told the officer I was half-Iraqi, taken to America as a child, that I was a member of the Dulaimi clan – and you don’t kidnap Dulaimis – and the officer couldn’t read English so didn’t know my real name.”

So I’m not keen on stopping for Iraqi checkpoints. We drive across the Tigris, waved through by a policeman in a hood – cops and insurgents both wear hoods which makes life a little tiring – and arrive at the grim little hotel where The Independent has its office. Extra security now. More armed men on the gates – most are Kurdish – and a guard who wants to search my bag. He, too, cannot cut the airline security string on my bag and waves me through. So a piece of string twice stopped my baggage being searched. Very comforting.

My Iraqi fixer offers to buy groceries for me but I decide I’ve got to buy them myself. Once you let Iraqis buy your food on the streets, tell you what people are saying, come back to you with their observations, you have entered the point-less hothouse of hotel journalism, the reporter with the mobile phone trapped in his room who might as well be broadcasting or writing from Co Mayo. So we slink off down side streets to the Warda grocery

store in Karada. It’s a broad street with lots of men languishing on the pavements, many holding mobiles. That’s how it’s done these days. A guy with a mobile sees an American patrol, a police unit, a foreigner, and squeezes the dial pad and a bunch of gunmen in a car not far away roar round to blow themselves up or kidnap the stranger – for money, for execution, for politics.

The Egyptian diplomat murdered last month had stopped at a newspaper stand. So we say, “10 minutes”. That’s all I’ve got in the grocery store. Sugar, Arabic bread – a big queue so I squeeze through and grab two loaves and hear someone mutter *ajnabi* (foreigner) and I go for the Perrier bottles, the tinned fruits, the sardines, and I push up to the counter.

Eight minutes. “Change in Iraqi money?” Doesn’t matter. Wrong reply. Too desperate. Should have said “Iraqi”. Three boxes of bottled water. Nine minutes. Your time is up. Out into the oven-like heat, into the car, a sharp turn to the right, into another alleyway. Ten minutes. Made it.

My fixer looks at me from the front of the car – I am in the back, reading an Arabic newspaper to partly conceal my face – and puts his finger in the air. “Another suicide bombing in Baghdad. An attack on a police patrol. Four policemen dead.” Welcome back to the city of one thousand and one nights.