

## **Comment: Falsely Accused**

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"Agent Salaam" was told to quit working for the Americans or face death at the hands of the mujahedin.

One evening around a week ago, my teenaged brother was in the backyard turning off our generator when he discovered a letter addressed to "Agent Salaam", which contained threats to kill me and my family if I continued to "work for the American forces".

The letter mentioned that I had relations with a political party that came from outside Iraq in collaboration with the Americans. "Let Intifadh Kanbar protect you if he can," it said, referring to the press spokesman for the Iraqi National Congress, INC.

I have no connections with this party, but the day before I had attended an INC press conference and two satellite channels - Al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya - had broadcast footage of me asking a question.

This is not the first such message I have received, having been passed a generic warning - signed by the "honourable resistance" - a few months ago. "To all fathers and mothers, do not let your sons work with the infidel Americans, as it will bring shame to you," it read.

Before that, one of my neighbours passed along an oral warning advising a local construction contractor and myself not to cooperate with the American forces.

I'm not sure why anyone would think I had cooperated with the US military. My best guess is that it had to do with a time when a neighbour was carjacked and I accompanied him to the police station to translate his story to the American troops there.

In another incident, I spoke with an American patrol in our neighbourhood that wanted to arrest a group of our neighbours who had gathered on the street after curfew. I explained that the neighbours were merely trying to help an unconscious drunk get to his feet.

As a result of this string of threats, I had stressful arguments with my family, who insisted that I run away or go into hiding until we could sell our house and move elsewhere. I had no desire to run like a thief. Besides, I believed these people would not leave me alone, and that I would be their quarry for a long time to come.

I knew from neighbours that those who issued the threats prayed at a local mosque. I had also heard that it was common practice for people who have received threats to go there and make a pledge against working for the US.

So I went to the mosque at midnight, found the sheikh, and told him angrily that some of his congregants had threatened me.

The sheikh insisted that this was a tradition. He said I was not guilty, but that it was common practice for accused people to declare their innocence and promise never to work with US personnel again.

But I did have contact with Americans, I explained. It's ordinary for journalists to have contacts with all kinds of people. I even attended US Secretary of State Colin Powell's press conference – did that mean that I worked for him, I asked?

We fixed an appointment for the next day's sunset prayers. In the presence of the sheikh and a number of his worshippers, I declared that I was a journalist, and had been falsely accused by "criminals who called themselves mujahedin".

My audience listened to me impassively, but I have not heard anything more on the matter since then.

Salaam Jihad is an IWPR trainee in Baghdad.

**Location:** Iraqi Kurdistan

Iraq

**Focus:** Iraq

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