

Comment: Little Saddams Still at Large

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Ba'ath party heavies still lurk in every neighbourhood, reminding people of their intimidating role in the past.

Three days ago I received a death threat from our local Ba'ath party "block captain" - the party official formerly responsible for our neighbourhood in Baghdad.

The threat was not delivered personally, since the Ba'athist is in hiding. Instead, he sent his daughter to the home of another neighbour, who is on good terms with both our families, and that neighbour passed it on to my little brother. The message was that I should stop working for the Americans or else I would be killed.

I don't work for the Americans. But I do talk a lot, and loudly, about how much I hated the old regime. This old Ba'athist's house has been raided a few times because many people in the neighbourhood dislike him. So I assume that he just jumped to false conclusions about me.

The last time I saw our neighbourhood Ba'athist was just after the fall of Baghdad. At that point, he was dressed in tribal robes and preparing to escape.

Before that, during the war, I saw him striding through our neighbourhood, rifle in hand and ammunition clips strapped across his chest, shouting that an American pilot had bailed out of his plane and landed in our area. They brought thousands of people to scour the place, and ended up burning a swathe of reeds in an attempt to smoke out the "airman". As it turned out, our quarry was only a pack of propaganda leaflets.

I'm not overly worried about his threats now. He's weak - he has to sneak in and out to visit his family. I should also emphasise how much people dislike him around here. In fact, if he ever came after me, he'd be in more danger than I would be. I suppose he makes these threats because he senses his weakness - the bluster represents a final chance for him to flex his muscles.

Still, this kind of thing can't help but awaken nightmarish memories of a time, not so long ago, when this Ba'athist and his friends held the power of life or death over the rest of us.

I remember one incident quite vividly. It happened during the war. I was at work when a police car raced up, with an officer shouting that American paratroops were descending on Baghdad and that I should tell the relevant officials in my neighbourhood.

A colleague and I dashed home and told the local intelligence officer. He answered ominously: "You need to come with me." At first, he didn't believe we had been sent by a police officer. We waited five hours, certain he would draw his pistol and summarily execute us for rumour-mongering. Eventually he told us not to spread such stories again, and sent us home.

Even today, we still see some of these Ba'athist people in our neighbourhoods. Sometimes we see a number of expensive cars pull up in front of one of their houses - clearly some sort of meeting. But we never bother to tell the coalition. Maybe the coalition translator doesn't like you, and will make sure that the US officer doesn't believe you. Then again, the coalition officials may believe you and raid the house - but they'll release the Ba'athists after a few days for lack of evidence.

The Iraqi police, meanwhile, only bother with ordinary crime – and if you walk into the Ministry of Interior, you might well end up delivering your complaint to a former party member.

Maybe when they finally install a mobile phone network, people will call in when they see suspicious activity. Until then, though, I think that these Ba’athists will come and go as they please.

I have nothing against party members who joined out of necessity, for work reasons. My old boss was a high-ranking Ba’athist. But all of the employees in his firm still liked and respected him. Ironically, he was just high enough in the party to lose his job as part of the de-Ba’athification campaign.

The second-in-command - who now runs the department - was by contrast a real ideologue. Before the war, he arbitrarily cancelled all of our vacation time, in case any of us try to leave the country to escape military service. “We are under threat from the Americans, so you shouldn’t go outside Iraq,” he told us. This man is still my boss.

Other Ba’athists tried to do their work as humanely as possible. The father of one of my friends, for example, would never report any of the military deserters in our neighbourhood. He’d never turn someone in for spreading rumours either. You could complain about Saddam to his face. That old man now sits in the coffeehouse and play dominos in complete peace, confident that no one in the neighbourhood means him harm.

So, we’re not totally free of the old fear. The United States may have captured the big Saddam, but the little Saddams are still with us.

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