

Road to Damascus Still Risky

Author: IWPR

The dangers which the siege of Fallujah created for road travel have been reduced, but travellers from Baghdad to the western border are still prey to bandits and corrupt customs men.

For drivers and passengers travelling on Iraq's international highways, the siege of Fallujah added more time and higher risks to the already arduous journey between Baghdad and its borders with Syria and Jordan.

Travellers had to endure long detours through insurgent-held territory – in addition to the perennial bandits and corrupt border officials – on their long journeys through the deserts of western Iraq and farmlands of the upper Euphrates valley.

"The trip is like a group of soldiers going into battle unarmed in enemy territory," said Firas Nadhem, a driver who makes the journey from Hafedh al-Qadi square in central Baghdad to Syria.

"Passengers are always tense and nervous. Sometimes they curse and blaspheme the whole time," said Walid Abd al-Jawad, another driver who plies the route.

For most of April, the main highway to Syria was closed by US troops besieging Fallujah, forcing drivers onto single-lane side roads north of the beleaguered city.

The route, besides adding as many as 16 hours to the eight-hour trip to the border, put travellers at the mercy of anti-Coalition fighters.

"We were stopped by the resistance, their face covered with yishmagh shawls and carrying grenades and Kalashnikovs," said Nadhem. He said the fighters checked everyone's passport to make sure that there were no foreigners among them.

An estimated 50 foreigners have been abducted since large-scale fighting broke out in Fallujah in early April, many of them on the desert road from Jordan.

Passengers' IDs were also checked to make sure that there was no evidence of "collaboration" with the Coalition, Nadhem said. Once that was clear, the insurgents then collected 20,000 dinars, about 14 US dollars, in "tolls" and allowed the vehicle to continue on its way.

A political deal struck in Fallujah in early May has led to the reopening of the main highway, and the insurgents – for now at least – appear to have faded back into the countryside.

But bandits still ply the highway – particularly the low desert hills around the Kilometre 160 rest-stop just west of Ramadi, where they overtake passenger vehicles and force them to the roadside.

General Abd al-Hadi Salih al-Rawi, head of the al-Salaam police station responsible for the area near Kilometre 160, said his officers recorded 20 cases of robbery in the first week of May.

Police, he says, lack both vehicles and communications equipment, while the bandits have both – plus heavy weapons to defend themselves.

Bahaa Abd al-Karim al-Kubaisi, an investor travelling through the area from Jordan, was one of those victims.

"On May 4, 2004, three cars stopped me – a grey BMW and two black Opels. Six masked men carrying PKS [heavy machineguns] threatened me, took me out of the car, tore off my shirt, and tied my hands with a yishmagh shawl."

Kubaisi was abandoned by the side of the road, but was rescued a half hour later by police who had been notified by a passing motorist. He lost his car and his documents, along with 10,000 dollars and some Iraqi dinars.

Travellers' woes don't end when they reach the border, either.

At the al-Walid border post, even after documents have been stamped and the vehicle checked, the driver shepherding one weary group of travellers is approached by a customs inspector who asks him for cash. The driver hands over 10,000 dinars, about seven dollars.

Officials in Baghdad say the central government has little control over what goes on at the border, leading to widespread corruption. According to Major Majed Hamid, a Baghdad-based official with the border guards, the local tribes who control the border area and exert influence over the frontier posts have "started to give honorary ranks to illiterate people, which leads to dishonest treatment of travellers and demands for money".

Another border official, Raed Nazar, says frontier posts have begun cracking down on corruption and firing dishonest personnel since April.

Nonetheless, one young customs official freely admits that the practice continues. When officers stopped a Syrian truck smuggling petrol out of Iraq, he said he earned the equivalent of 10 dollars in bribes, while the chief inspector got 40 dollars.

"My salary is 100,000 dinars [70 dollars] a month and I haven't received it in three months," he explained.

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