

US Still Welcome in Kurdistan

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Kurdish peshmerga fighters even protect the American base and accompany soldiers on main roads.

American soldiers based here don't have to call in air strikes against foreign fighters or exchange gunfire with Baathist loyalists.

Nor do they live in mortal fear of deadly IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, along the roadsides.

In fact, says one soldier who travels in this area, "I always see the thumbs up, and little kids offer us candies."

Major John T Hubert, one of around a hundred members of the US army and special forces based in the Sulaimaniyah governorate in north-eastern Iraq, said, "I tell people I have the best job in Iraq. People love us here."

He and his fellow soldiers in the 451 civil affairs battalion are assigned to monitor up to 28 CPA projects initiated by the local Kurdish government.

The Kurds have been running their own governments in parts of northern Iraq since the end of the 1991 Gulf war.

With a budget of 1.6 million US dollars, the civil affairs soldiers have overseen school renovations, bridge and sewage reconstruction, and the building of a 195,000 dollar dialysis centre. They have also equipped student activities centres, and other smaller projects.

Based in an old Iraqi military facility on the outskirts of Sulaimaniyah, the American troops spend their spare time playing cards and chatting online with their families and friends back home.

They also venture out to explore nearby mountains or stay in the luxurious hotel at Dukan Lake, 45 minutes from Sulaimaniyah.

To make life a bit safer for them, Kurdish peshmerga fighters protect the American base and accompany soldiers on the main roads.

"I gain a lot of comfort from the PUK [Patriotic Union of Kurdistan] leaders and peshmergas," said Sgt George L Rivera, who sent Iranian rugs and jewellery to his family in America, along with the standard photographs. "I feel safe here," he said.

Other US soldiers echo his feeling.

"The Kurdish military and police made every resource available to ensure the safety of American troops" said Major Mike Simonelli of the US army reserves who served in Sulaimaniyah from the end of the fighting

last year until this March.

Significantly, the Kurds do not view the US soldiers as foreign occupiers of their land. "We look at them like guests who will not stay here forever," said police officer Abdulla Kamal.

The Kurdish press - both party and independent - never refer to American forces as "occupiers", "invaders" or "the enemy", as do news outlets in other parts of Iraq. Here, they are called coalition forces, US soldiers or liberators.

And in other parts of Iraq, where Shia and Sunni religious leaders form a nucleus of opposition to the coalition forces, Kurdish clerics espouse a more tolerant view.

"We are happy the American forces are here," said Sheikh Majed Hafid, whose grandfather, Sheikh Mahmood, led the Kurdish rebellion against the British occupation in the early 1920s.

The sheikh is the Imam of the Grand Mosque which lies in the heart of the Sulaimaniyah bazaar, not far from a billboard-sized mural of his grandfather who looks over a bustling traffic circle - the site of demonstrations against the British and their Iraqi government in the 1920s.

Deep inside the mosque, Sheikh Majed sits at his computer in front of a bookshelf which houses classical poems in the Farsi language by the Iranian poet Hafiz, along with Arabic religious texts and Kurdish language Islamic books.

Throughout the centuries, the sheikh points out, the Kurds have been under the rule of Persian, Ottoman and the Baath party invaders. But the Americans are a lot easier to get along with.

"We don't care if they stay here for another 100 years," he said.

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