

The Christian And The Holy Man

LATE ONE EVENING near the end of June, the *Standard* night newsdesk rang up. It was the first I'd heard from them in ages. The guy on the end of the line wasn't even sure if I was still in Iraq.

'You doing anything on these dead Brits then, Colin?' he said.

'Er... yeah, maybe.'

I was playing for time. I had no idea what he was talking about. Once again, I hadn't been near a TV or internet café for days. But a golden rule with newsdesks is that you never admit to ignorance of anything. No matter what your excuse, it never looks good if they know more about what's happening on your patch than you do.

'So are you going down there?'

'Er, yeah, hopefully tomorrow.'

Where?

'Excellent. It's obviously going to be a huge story, so if you can file for us, that would be great. Only if you think it's safe, of course.'

'Absolutely.'

What had I just let myself in for?

'Great. Will be you be able to get there in time for the later editions tomorrow?'

'Er, need to check with my driver first. Actually, while you're on the phone, can you just read me out the latest wire report? Just want to check nothing's changed.'

It's an old ruse. You get the newsdesk to tell you the story, while maintaining the bluff that you know it all already.

'Sure, let me just dig it out. Yeah, here we go.... Six British soldiers were found shot dead in an Iraqi police station today. The bodies of the Royal Military policemen were recovered from the town of Majar al Kabir, near the city of Al Amarah, 100 miles north of Basra... blah, blah... it is understood that the six soldiers were helping to train up the local policemen at the station... Army still investigating... picture confused... can't comment further at this

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point. That's about it. So, yeah, plenty of room for having a nose around there tomorrow. What are people at your end saying about it?'

'Er... well, it's all a bit unclear right now. Sounds like one of the Iraqi coppers has killed them. Inside job, sort of thing.'

'Maybe. Anyway, speak tomorrow, yeah?'

Next morning I rose at six and took a taxi straight over to Mohammed's house, a modest villa in New Baghdad. The moment I mentioned Majar al Kabir, his face screwed up.

'Majar al Kabir? That is a bad fucking place. I was there with the Iraqi Army. A very poor area, full of criminals and dangerous fuckers. Giving even President Saddam Hussein trouble.'

'Well, are you willing to go?'

'Yes, but we must take a Kalashnikov or a pistol to protect us.'

'We can't do that. We're journalists. We don't carry guns.'

'Why not? Take it from me, speaking as a military man, everyone else will have them. How else will I protect you, a foreigner?'

'Well, journalists are like the Red Cross. We're not a threat, so people won't hurt us.' From the way he looked at me, I might as well have added that journalists could also heal the sick and walk on water. 'Besides,' I said. 'It won't be dangerous down there. The British Army will be all over the town, after this incident. How long will it take to get there?'

'It is about 300 kilometres from here, let's say. Let us perform the calculations.' Mohammed went into a detailed breakdown of the various roads, speeds and potential traffic hazards and hold-ups, ticking them off as if planning the parameters of a military assault. 'So, travelling at an average speed of 100 kilometres per hour, we will arrive at around 2 or 3pm.'

'Great, that'll be in time for the *Standard* deadlines.'

We spent nearly an hour getting the Nissan fixed up with oil and water and repairing slow punctures in all four tyres. It felt like saddling up on an old nag for an epic wagon trail journey during which it would probably die. Yet the clock on the dashboard, I noticed, said only 25,000 kilometres.

'Mohammed, has this car really only done 25,000 kilometres?'

'No, 425,000,' he said proudly. 'It has been back to zero four times now. But I have put a new engine in it.'

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425,000 kilometres, I worked out, was roughly 10 times round the world. I was amazed it was still running at all. As, indeed, was a fat Iraqi policeman, who stopped us at a checkpoint near the outskirts of Baghdad.

‘Where are you going?’ he asked Mohammed.

‘Majar al Kabir.’

‘In this car?’

‘Inshallah.’

‘Inshallah, you will, my friends. On your way.’

Ten minutes later we were stopped by the roadside, nursing one definite flat tyre and two suspected ones. The puncture repairs had simply liquefied after sustained exposure to the hot asphalt. We limped into the nearest town, where, to Mohammed’s astonishment, I treated him to four brand new tyres at \$30 each on the *Standard*. As we waited for the Nissan to be re-shod, I rang the newsdesk for latest reports from Majar al Kabir. The news was not good. The full picture of why the soldiers had been killed was now emerging. Contrary to my earlier theory, they hadn’t been the victims of a single, crazed gunman inside the police station. Instead they’d been chased in there by a mob of several hundred armed locals, who’d then apparently executed them on the spot. Relations with the British had been bad for weeks, apparently, since troops had started searching local homes for stashes of illegal weapons. And rather than flooding the town with troops, the Brits had now pulled out altogether to let things cool down a bit. If we got a similar reception to the soldiers, there’d be nobody coming to help.

Fear kicked in. If I’d known it was going to be as dicey as this, I’d have never volunteered. But it was too late to get out now. For the first time since getting to Iraq, the *Standard* newsdesk were keen for my services. I could just imagine the mutters on the newsdesk if I suddenly pulled back.

‘*Bloody Freeman, bloody useless idiot. Gets halfway down there, then bottles it.*’

‘*Yeah. Should’ve stuck with sodding roadworks.*’

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As Mohammed handed over my dollars, I took a nervous piss in a ditch at the back of the garage. What was it that Mike Leese on the *Standard* newsdesk had told me? That war zone reporters got hard-ons when the action loomed? I looked down. Nothing whatsoever. Quite the opposite, in fact.

The suburbs of south Baghdad gradually thinned out, giving way to palm groves criss-crossed with ditches and swamps. Clumps of reeds stuck out like tufts of mangy hair on the desert scrub. This was the farming hinterland of the River Tigris, a fertile strip that had been cultivated since the dawn of civilisation. It followed the river as it meandered south all the way to Basra and the Arabian Gulf. After the hard-baked, faecal stink of Baghdad's unwashed concrete jungle, the difference in atmosphere was palpable. The breeze was humid, and the mere smell of vegetable matter that wasn't putrefying hit the nose like air-freshener.

It was time to read up about Al Amarah and the south. I flicked open the *Bradt Travel Guide to Iraq*. Most Middle East guidebooks no longer gave the country more than a few pages, because it had been closed to tourists for years. But Bradt, a small British travel publisher, seemed to specialise in covering those few places left on earth where even the *Lonely Planet* didn't tread. There were Bradt guides to Rwanda and Haiti, and they were working on others for North Korea and Afghanistan. The Iraq book had come out the previous year, catering mainly for UN officials, aid agency workers, and occasional parties of tourists on archaeological tours – plus, now, journalists and soldiers.

'Southern Iraq', according to Bradt, effectively meant all points south of Baghdad. The south was a stronghold of Shia Islam, the rival sect to the Sunni Islam followed by most people further north, including Saddam. The two schools had emerged out of a split in the faith over who should succeed the prophet Mohammed as spiritual leader after his death in ad632. Some said the job should go to Mohammed's son-in-law, Ali, while others argued it should be put to election. The two rival camps finally went their separate ways in ad680, after Ali's son Hussein and his followers were massacred in the desert south of Baghdad. Ever since, the faith of Shi'ism – meaning literally 'followers' – had styled itself as the champions of the oppressed. Thanks to the despotism of successive Iraqi leaders like Saddam, they'd seldom been short of a constituency.

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In fact, Saddam was actually pretty secular by the standards of Arab rulers, partly because of his megalomania. He had little time for anybody, Sunni or Shia, who worshipped God ahead of him. Nonetheless, he distrusted Shias because of their religious links to neighbouring Iran, which became a Shia Islamic state when Ayatollah Khomeini deposed the Shah, its pro-American monarch, in 1979. Khomeini, who viewed Saddam as just another godless Western pawn like the Shah, then started encouraging Islamic revolution in Iraq too. Saddam declared war in 1980, with half a million lives lost on each side in the eight years that followed. Relatively few Iraqi Shias had any qualms about fighting their religious brethren across the border: they were Arabs and the Iranians were Persians, two distinct ethnic groups who'd often been enemies. But when Saddam's popularity had hit an all-time low after the crushing defeat of the 1991 Gulf War, it was the Shias of the south who'd led the uprisings. Saddam crushed the rebellion by killing tens of thousands of people, and from then on, had systematically starved the south of resources.

The view from the car confirmed we were heading into Saddam's unloved boondocks. The only sign of civilisation was small, jerry-built villages, their residents sharing space with scruffy sheep, cows and donkeys. Packs of semi-feral, lupine dogs patrolled the roadside, sniffing at the corpses of companions who'd strayed into the oncoming traffic. Fewer people dressed in western clothes, and nearly all the women wore abayas, the all-encompassing black cloaks that hid everything but a strip across the eyes. They worked like beasts of burden, tilling the fields and travelling in the back of their husbands' pick-up trucks among the livestock, while the menfolk rode comfortably upfront. While the route into Baghdad from the west was a proper motorway, here it was a two-lane trunk road, with slow-moving tractors jostling perilously with saloon cars doing 80mph. Mohammed's overtaking tactic was to tailgate each vehicle from a nerve-wrackingly close distance, blasting the horn until it moved aside.

By 3pm we were nearing Al Amarah. A large roadside mural loomed up, where Saddam's picture been replaced by that of an elderly, white-bearded Shia cleric, frowning sternly at passing motorists. Mohammed glowered back.

'Look at these fucking bastards, they are everywhere now. First Saddam, now them.'

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‘Don’t you like religious people?’

‘Not these fuckers. These are just like the imams in Iran. Wishing to tell people what to do all the time.’ He began glancing around anxiously. ‘I don’t like it round here. It’s too quiet. People are expecting trouble. And where are the Britishers? There is no security. This is bad territory, you know. Killers, robbers, all roaming around. I was crazy not to bring a pistol.’

He rummaged in the holdall that he’d dumped in the back seat, pulling out a white hand towel and a garish checked shirt of the kind favoured by most Iraqi men.

‘Wear this shirt over your t-shirt, and put the towel over your head. People will think you are a Christian.’

‘But I am a Christian. Technically.’

‘I mean an Iraqi Christian.’

‘You have Christians in Iraq?’

‘Sure, man. Maybe one million of them. They are Arabs, but just not so dark. More like you.’

I draped the towel over my head and shoulders and looked in the mirror. With my stubble, I looked like Mohammed’s rather unattractive wife.

‘Er... am I going to have to wear this in Majar al Kabir?’

‘No, of course not. They will kill you if they see you dressed like that. Just here in the car. If some guy just looks quickly as he is driving past, it will work as a disguise.’

He stuck a cassette in the stereo. A mournful Arab male voice began singing, unaccompanied. It was quite restful, like the kind of stuff you got on post-rave chill-out tapes.

‘This guy’s rather good. Who is he?’

‘This is the Koran, our Holy Book. The prayers of Islam. We will play it now as we go into the dangerous place. Protect our souls, by God.’

For someone who didn’t like imams, he was suddenly showing a lot of faith.

Majar al Kabir was down a fork off the main highway to Basra. A small boy was sat selling cigarettes at the junction, watching us like a sentry. Mohammed pulled up, bought a packet and chatted with him.

‘Ask him if there’s any British soldiers down there, or any other press.’

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‘I already did. He says no Britisher soldiers. Press, yes, one or two came earlier.’

I felt a stab of relief. Much as the *Standard* might have liked a first ‘first reporter into the town of death’ exclusive, I was glad that someone else had already tested the waters.

As we hit the outskirts of Majar al Kabir, Mohammed explained that it meant ‘town-near-the-large-bend-in-the-river’. A more accurate description might have been ‘Hick-shithole-with-lots-of-men-wandering-around-nervously-with-guns’. In the absence of any law and order, locals had set up a checkpoint on the town’s main drag, manned half-heartedly by gunmen in civilian clothes. Mohammed asked them the way to the police station. As he chatted, their initial suspicion suddenly melted and they shook his hand.

‘They seem very friendly. What did you say to them?’ I asked.

‘Ah, just something. Never mind for now.’

‘You haven’t told them I’m a doctor again, have you?’ He’d already used this trick once in Baghdad, much to my disapproval.

‘No. I will tell you later.’

The police station was a single-storey white-brick compound overlooking a garbage-strewn square. A small crowd milled around outside.

‘OK, I am going to see how the mood is,’ said Mohammed. ‘If the people are OK, we can stay for maybe some small time. And listen – we will have a code word. If I say to you, *The weather is getting hot*, then we go straightaway. No arguing, OK?’

‘Er, yes, that’s fine.’

‘Remember, this is as per the military procedure. Always judging the danger. Always formulating the escape plan.’

We got out, me flashing my press badge and him flashing some Iraqi ID card. His credentials seemed to impress much more than mine. Several looked at him as if to say: ‘Wow. *Really?*’ What was he showing them?

‘It’s OK, we can stay,’ said Mohammed. ‘Yesterday, they were angry. Now they are scared at what the Britishers will do to them.’

The crowd ushered us into the police station, where the six military policemen had ended up besieged by the mob. Inside was an overgrown courtyard with cells running around the perimeter, most empty or derelict. At the back was the one from where the soldiers’

bodies had been recovered. It had been set on fire, possibly to destroy any forensic evidence, although there were still tiny flecks of blood on the surviving paintwork.

‘So,’ I said. ‘Can anyone tell us what happened?’

One by one various locals were put up to tell their stories. The spark for the dispute tallied with what I’d heard on the way down – that British soldiers had upset the locals during searching of homes for weapons. They were said to have barged in on lone women and used teams of sniffer dogs, creatures Muslims regarded as dirty. But everything that happened from then was in dispute. Some said the soldiers had signed a written agreement not to come into town any more, and that when they’d turned up yesterday in the central souk locals thought they were breaking the agreement. A few kids had chucked tomatoes and stones, one or two soldiers had cuffed the kids back, and a fight had developed from there. Others, however, said the soldiers had been in the police station the whole time, and that they’d just been attacked by the mob without warning. Some accounts had the troops meekly surrendering, only to be executed in cold-blood. Others had them making a last stand on the rooftops, blazing away Alamo-style until they ran out of ammo. Depending on who you asked, between four and 400 Iraqis had also died.

Conspiracy theories abounded. The men who led the attack were renegade Ba’athists, said one man. No they weren’t, said another, they were Iranian agents. Whoever they were, they were all from out of town. Well, the ringleaders anyway. But it was really the fault of the British, according to Haji Sami Joni, one of the town’s elders. In one breath he voiced his condolences to the soldiers’ next of kin. And in the next he sympathised with those who’d murdered them. ‘This has brought such shame upon us – until now we had such good relations with the British,’ he said. ‘But they must realise they can’t come into our homes and disrespect our women like they did.’

After two hours of note-taking we headed off to a hotel in Al Amarah, a tumbledown heap of indescribable squalor that made the Al Majalis look posh. After filing a story over my satellite phone for the *Standard*, I started a more in-depth piece that *The Scotsman* had asked for. It was hard to know what to say. Even if some of Major al Kabir’s ‘witnesses’ were being honest, the truth was already long-buried under a tangle of hearsay and conspiracy theory. It was like the

Kennedy assassination, only with several hundred different assassins blazing away with AK-47s from various grassy knolls. In the end, my report fudged it altogether, which is usually the only sensible thing to do unless you have 10,000 words of space to work with.

‘Exactly how this dirt-poor Shia town became the scene of the worst massacre of British troops since their arrival on Iraqi soil three months ago was a matter of mystery, speculation and fevered local gossip last night.’

Which was a posh way of saying, ‘Sorry folks, not got a clue.’

What was clear was that despite their generally friendly demeanour, Iraqis could turn very hostile very quickly. Even to the British, who had a reputation for being friendlier and cuddlier than their American counterparts. A few ringleaders might have orchestrated the violence, but several hundred ordinary bystanders had apparently been quite happy to join in. One minute they’d been minding their own business in the marketplace. The next they were diving headlong into a full-scale armed scrap. What kind of society bred people like that?

‘This is the way of the Iraqi tribes,’ said Mohammed. ‘In the countryside, they are very strong. You attack one, you attack them all. Just like these, what do you call them?’ He made a buzzing sound.

‘Bees? But I thought the Shia liked the British for getting rid of Saddam?’

‘They do. But let me tell you something. In the Iraqi military, we used to say that the Shia is like the large, sleeping dog. He is peaceful until you disturb him. But when he gets angry – God help you.’

‘Really?’

‘Take it from me. I am a military man, knowing all the ways of the peoples of Iraq.’

True enough, Mohammed had been impressive that day. Unlike my old translator Haider, he’d taken control of the situation completely. He’d worked the volatile crowds like a master of ceremonies, lining up witnesses, cross-examining, cajoling and consoling as required. Occasionally he’d even made lengthy speeches himself, reassuring anyone suspicious of our agenda. Watching, I’d got the impression that he must have made quite a good army commander. Plus, he was bigger than just about anyone else there. Then I remembered the ID card he’d been showing.

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‘By the way, what was that card you kept showing everyone?’ Mohammed smiled and fished it out of his wallet. On it was his picture alongside an emblem of a mosque.

‘What is that?’

‘My father was a Sunni, my mother a Shia. But this card shows that I was born in Khadhomiya. It is a holy Shia place just north of Baghdad. The people in Majar al Kabir are very religious, like all the tribes from the country zones. When they see I was born in Khadhomiya, they become most respectful. It is as per their custom. I tell you, they are some crazy bastards in that town, very angry. But whenever some guy was saying bad things, I would say, “Please, I am a holy guy from Khadhomiya, do not make this trouble in front of me.” ’

‘Really?’ Judging by his fondness for alcohol and knowledge of foreign swear words, Mohammed’s Shia piety was not that great. His ID seemed to be a kind of religious get-out-jail-free card, accepted in Shia redneck towns everywhere.

‘So the card is better than a gun, then?’

‘Let me speak frankly, as a military man. Nothing is better than a gun.’

We stayed in Al Amarah the rest of the week. The British Army seemed anxious to say nothing more about the whole event. When we visited their main base outside town, a sentry on the gate told me to piss off, thinking I was an Iraqi. When I told him I was a journalist, he disappeared to consult his senior commanders for an hour. I assumed he’d return with a senior commander, who’d grant an exclusive interview by way of apology. Instead he came back with a phone number for the Ministry of Defence press office in London. They weren’t saying anything either. Each day, we ventured nervously into Majar al Kabir to see if anything was going on. Newspapers back home were anxious for us to be on hand when the British Army rolled back into town again, as they’d hinted they would do. Yet even with his all-powerful ID card, Mohammed wouldn’t permit any visits longer than an hour or two.

‘But what happens if the British come back and we’re not there? My office won’t be happy.’

‘You can’t stay in that town all the time, man! You must understand, it is a danger place! One grenade, one pistol shot, that is enough, we will all be dead.’

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Eventually he told me why he was so cautious. When the British Army had been doing the weapons searches that had caused so much fuss, they hadn't just been looking for Kalashnikovs or pistols. They were searching for serious hardware: heavy machine guns and rocket-propelled-grenades, weapons the locals had acquired while fighting Saddam in the Shia rebellion of 1991. Weapons that had once been ranged against Mohammed. For four grim years after 1991, he had been posted down here with the Iraqi Army, his tank division charged with crushing any insurrection. It hadn't been easy. Backed by the Iranians across the border, Shia guerrillas had mounted a well-organised insurgent campaign, carrying out constant hit and run attacks on the Iraqi military. Saddam responded with typical brutality, ordering that villages suspected of harbouring rebels should be razed if they didn't hand them over. But his own harsh measures were paid back in spades. One of Mohammed's own junior officers was abducted and later found with his head on a pole. Majar al Kabir was known as one of the most hostile insurgent towns. For Mohammed, it felt just as much as enemy territory as it did for the British.

'Were your own division ever asked to burn down villages or anything?' I asked him one night.

'What do you think? We were following the orders of the President of Iraq, Saddam Hussein.' I didn't feel I knew him quite well enough to ask him whether the villagers had been burned along with villages, but he seemed to sense the question. 'Some people, yes, will be saying this was, let's say, some kind of war crime. But what could you do? It was a bad, bad time. Never, though, I tell you, did I do anything that was not as per the strict military procedures.'

I wondered what he meant by that. Saddam's armies, after all, were not exactly known for their strict rules of engagement. You could stick exactly to the textbook and still get a lot of blood on your hands.

Satar al Battat, a young imam at Majar al Kabir's main mosque, was not the obvious person to turn to for a spot of PR crisis management. His manner was as sombre as his black imam's robes, and when his voice screamed out of the Tannoy in the mosque's minaret, he made Ian Paisley sound like some half-hearted Anglican vicar. By Friday,

though, the British had enlisted him to persuade the locals that it would be good if everyone made friends again. A senior commander invited him to the British base at Al Amarah that morning, hoping to get him to deliver a sermon of reconciliation at Friday's lunchtime prayers.

Reluctantly, Mohammed agreed that we could go and watch him preach, a move he regretted almost as soon as we hit town. A vast crowd of several thousand people had gathered for the prayer session, packing the mosque and filling a football-pitch sized area of scrubland in front of it. Boys with large water cannisters strapped to their backs wandered through the crowd, squirting a rose-scented water over bodies sweating in the midday sun. After four days of expecting to be pulverised by British warplanes at any minute, everybody was extremely jumpy. As midday loomed with no sign of al Battat's return, the elders got restive.

'They are wondering why the imam has not returned yet,' said Mohammed after chatting to them. 'They think he's been arrested by the Britishers. A trap.'

'Well, I don't think the British would do that, actually.'

'Maybe you think that. But they don't. They want to march to the base to demand his release. And they are thinking that you, the Britisher, should come with them to help negotiate.'

'Oh.'

I imagined what would happen if I led a delegation of several thousand locals to the gates of the British base. Somehow, I doubted they'd be palmed off with a phone number for the Ministry of Defence press office. Instead, a bloodbath would ensue, leading to the spread of an anti-British insurgency all over southern Iraq, as the sleeping Shia dog woke up and bit, very hard. In subsequent accounts, military historians would blame it all on me.

Fortunately, before the matter could be discussed any more, Imam al Battat turned up safe and sound. Now, though, was the worry of how the meeting had gone. Would he now preach peace, or use his address to announce a jihad on all British oppressors? Starting with that idiot Brit journalist at the back? The whole town was waiting to find out.

After an ear-splitting hum of feedback from the mosque Tannoy, al Battat's voice suddenly broke through, silencing the crowd

instantly. Then, just as smoothly as they'd shut up, the crowd linked hands and broke into prayer. An awesome, uniform chant went up, loud as a football crowd but as harmonised as a Gregorian choir. Not a single voice, not even a child's, sounded out of time. I began to see what Mohammed meant about the Shia being like a big, sleeping dog. If this lot fought together like they prayed together, they'd be terrifying.

After the first prayer, al Battat began his sermon. At first, it didn't sound like the meeting with the British had gone well. In a roaring wail, he lumped the British presence with a long historical line of Shia oppressors, starting with Saddam and going right back to someone called Hajjaj, whom Mohammed said was a king from 500 years ago. People had long memories around here.

Eventually al Battat came to the point. 'The most important question now is whether there should be a jihad based on the violent behaviour of the British at Al Majar al Kabir,' he said. 'Today I tell you that the religious authorities will not yet give permission for one. There are peaceful means to get our rights.'

How very sensible, I thought. The path thus smoothed, the British rolled back into town the following afternoon, meeting no trouble whatsoever. And sure enough, we were back in Al Amarah at the time and missed the whole thing. Mohammed compensated by going on a mission to find some beer. The local booze shops had all shut down, having been grenaded the week before by Shia fundamentalists. But we eventually sourced a dozen cans via the hotel receptionist, the process as furtive as buying a dozen kilos of cocaine. We drank them in my room, Mohammed then hiding the empty cans in the car boot. 'If the Shia people here see those beer containers, they will kill us with sticks,' he said.

The next morning, as I was beginning to think about going home, he wandered into my room.

'Do you want to see who is the real power around here?' he asked.

'Er... how do you mean?'

His voice lowered to an unnecessary whisper. 'At the hotel reception today I heard them talking about a guy in Al Amarah named Kareem Mahood. They are saying he is the one who did the deal with the Britishers to let them back into Majar al Kabir. Not the imam you saw, he was not really important. Mahood has an office in town, and

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is going to be one of the new politicians here in Al Amarah. Maybe governor. But I know him as a different guy.'

'Yeah? Who?'

'He was the leader of the Shia resistance fighters when I was down here as an armoured officer. A crooky fucker. I spent four years of my life trying to catch him. Never did we get near him. But now maybe we can interview him, yes?'

'Maybe. What does "crooky" mean?'

'It means, let's say, a clever guy, dangerous.'

'Really?'

'He was in the Iraqi army like me, but just a warrant officer, not of high rank. Then, when the fighting with the Shia started, he joined the resistance, doing hundreds of operations against the Iraqi military. He used to disguise himself for spying operations. Sometimes as a simple farmer guy, sometimes as a businessman in a suit from Baghdad. But his favourite was to dress as an Iraqi army commander. One time he went to the Iraqi Army intelligence headquarters here in Al Amarah, wearing a fake brigadier's uniform. He made the guards let him in, and then went right into the intelligence headquarters and left a message for the head guy, Brigadier Hassan. Hassan comes in a few hours later and opens the message. Do you know what it says? "Dear Brigadier Hassan, I came by to say 'hello' but you were out. Fuck you, Kareem Mahood!"'

'Very clever.'

'I tell you, this guy was pretending to be a brigadier all the time. Once he freed a whole load of prisoners that way, another time he got hold of some weapons. But never, ever did we catch him. We did not even have a picture of him, except one aged about 15. And yet it became the military orders that every Iraqi officer had to carry this picture, in case they would recognise him if he was caught.'

'So was he Saddam's most wanted man?'

'Exactly. Eventually he had 8,000 fighters on his side.'

This was beginning to sound interesting. I could do Kareem Mahood up as the Che Guevara of Iraq... the man Saddam couldn't kill. Mohammed arranged for us to interview him at his new HQ in Al Amarah, a white-walled villa on the banks of the Tigris, opposite the British Army base where we'd nearly been frogmarched to rescue Imam al Battat on Friday.

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‘Just remember one thing,’ said Mohammed as an armed guard patted us down outside. ‘Do not say I am from Iraqi army. Otherwise they will think I am a spy and kill me.’

‘This guy won’t recognise you, will he?’

‘No. I have never seen him, and he has never seen me. Hopes to God.’

We were ushered into a large, bare lounge. Kareem Mahood sat on a settee, dressed in a spotless white robe and headdress lined with expensive-looking gold braid. He looked as hard as nails: craggy cheekbones, belligerent eyes and a big hooked Arab nose, like a bird of prey. There was definitely something of the warlord about him. One hand, decked in heavy gold rings, clutched a satellite phone, the only one I’d seen any Iraqi carry. The other clutched a small rubber stamp, which he used to authorise letters of recommendation to various supplicants who wandered in as we waited to interview him.

The other sign that Mahood was a man of parts was that he clearly had better things to do than yack to the likes of me. Most Iraqis were only too happy to be interviewed: the tough bit was shutting them up after half an hour or so. Kareem Mahood, however, gave us no more than five minutes, which elicited nothing more than a few enigmatic one-liners.

‘I’m told you were a famous fighter against Saddam? Can you tell me a bit about that?’

‘He says don’t ask him, ask the people of Al Amarah,’ said Mohammed, translating. ‘They will tell you everything you need to know.’

‘Er... right. Um, what does he think of what happened in Majar al Kabir?’

‘He says mistakes were made on both sides.’

‘Who does he blame?’

‘He says he will not discuss this. God willing, everything will be fine now.’

‘What did he say to the British when he met them?’

‘He says he will not discuss this.’

‘Well, who did he meet exactly? Can he tell us that?’

‘He is saying you ask many questions.’

We left with barely a usable quote in my notebook.

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‘I can not believe we met that crooky fucker,’ said Mohammed as we drove back to Baghdad. ‘You know, I wanted to tell him, “Hey, I am Mohammed Kadom, staff colonel of the Iraqi army. For four years I was hunting you, but always you are in disguise. Now it is me who is in disguise, and I finally find you!”’

‘You should have left a message for him, just like he did for that brigadier.’

Mohammed burst out laughing.