

LATEST SECURITY REPORT FROM CENTURION ADVISORS IN IRAQ

Sept 3, 2003

GENERAL

The last few days have been taken up with the huge funeral procession of Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim in Najaf. The event has and is drawing huge crowds from all along the route and advice is to stay away as tensions and emotions are running high among all Iraqis involved.

The situation over the last week has changed due to the threat against Westerners and all associated with them. Shops have been closing earlier due to the ongoing threat of bombs against Westerners.

Aid agencies are withdrawing from Iraq due to security implications. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has withdrawn its foreign staff. Oxfam cited the deteriorating security situation and stated that the level of risk had become unacceptable and the current climate prevented it from operating. An Oxfam spokesperson also referred to a "blurring" of the distinction between coalition forces and humanitarian operations in the country. This "blurring" could present a significant increase in the threat profile for those organisations. Attackers are still selecting "soft targets", and if an organisation or individual is found to have any connection with coalition forces they are more likely to become a target.

A number of NGOs are believed to be reviewing their security arrangements along with the majority of media organisations. Organisations such as media, NGOs and aid agencies are being advised to ensure their vehicles and equipment do not look similar to anything the military are using.

The whole place is very tense at the moment.

KIDNAPPINGS

There is an increase in kidnappings and ransom threats reported throughout Iraq. Forty reported kidnap incidents have occurred in the last three months. Kidnappers are believed to be former regime security and intelligence personnel who have been targeting wealthy families for large sums of money. Victims have reported that they have been tortured and families warned that if they do not come up with the ransom the victim will be executed.

The actual number of kidnappings is likely to be far higher than reported. Only Iraqi families have been reported to be targeted to date. There are, however, sufficient precedents in such circumstances for this threat to be taken seriously by all organisations operating in Iraq. International organisations, whether commercial or business, are likely to be seen as potential targets due to the relative wealth involved or back-up services being provided. It is therefore worth remembering that personnel not presenting a good security presence could be targeted.

As always, vary routes, timings and locations to reduce the threat of being an easy target and ensure you have essential security in place. All buildings used by the said organisations should ensure security is of the highest grade from local guards to external advisors.

CIVIL DISTURBANCES / PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS

There has been an increase in these incidents from the north to the south of Iraq. Coalition forces are advising media, NGOs and aid agency personnel to adhere to all of their recommendations, orders and instructions concerning these. Failure to do so could result in injury or death due to potential crossfire, isolated attacks, and the crowd becoming out of control and attacking Westerners or anyone who does not fit in.

As an example, three personnel from a UK-based newspaper and a US newspaper were told by police to stay away from mourners for their own safety, as the mourners were in a very angry mood. The three people ignored this advice and had to be rescued from the crowd by the same policemen.

Two camera crews were pushed, harassed and hit in the crowds in Najaf.

Think about the situation – is it a good time to film or can you film from a distance?

Local Arab cameramen used by agencies are being attacked since the Najaf bomb as they are being accused of belonging to Al Jazeera (one incident in Baghdad and one in Najaf).

CONVOY – VEHICLE SECURITY

The road from Baghdad to Amman is still very dangerous with rising numbers of robberies every day happening mostly between 0600-0800hrs. A few attacks occurring in the early evening have also been reported.

The bandits are targeting individual vehicles whether they appear to be Western or Iraqi.

Reports from our advisors say that the attackers are men on motorbikes using satellite phones to coordinate the attacks.

Some media organisations are now using the route in and out of Turkey (Harbur), just to avoid the road from Baghdad to Amman due to the increase in attacks.

The attackers are using more vehicles and becoming more organised as the days pass.

Some 19 vehicles were stopped and hijacked leaving all occupants at the roadside – no money or possessions were taken, just the vehicles. Apparently the attackers were polite and friendly!

An Italian news company had its car shot at, the driver was shot in the thigh and the car was riddled with a few rounds.

Two other convoys were shot at in the area of Tikrit and in the area of Samara.

A car-jacking was foiled in the Mansur area after a police chase resulting in two policemen dead and two injured civilians who were shot by the police.

Three garbage trucks and two water trucks were stolen. People worried that they may be used for future truck bombs.

Some vehicles being used by organisations have unsuitable tyres on them – have someone inspect them and if necessary purchase the proper ones as accidents are happening due to blowouts on incorrect tyres.

IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices)

IEDs have been found attached to 155mm or 130mm shells, and fuses have been attached. Attackers light the fuse and run. If the shell doesn't explode, they come back and set it up again, ready for the next target.

FLIGHTS

Organisations are using the service flying via Beirut to Baghdad, cutting out the danger on the Amman-Baghdad road.

A Beirut company (chartered) is flying Tuesdays and Fridays to Baghdad (15-seater plane).

Qatar Airlines is planning a route - Doha-Basra - sometime this week.

Polish airlines is planning the first Warsaw-Basra flight in the near future.

Reports are still saying that Basra airport is still closed to non-military air traffic.

The flight between Baghdad and Amman has been grounded – return date not known.

The US Air Cavalry said it would send a helicopter to the hotels if there were injured personnel from any incident.

HOTELS

Continued threats exist against the Palestine Hotel and the Sheraton Hotel, mainly due to the security in force with the US and the number of Westerners staying there.

OTHER INCIDENTS

Iraqi terrorists are using closed schools for training and target practice inside.

Civilian vehicles are being targeted as uniformed personnel were seen inside a couple over the last week.

A UK TV organisation's crew had a grenade threat against them. They are thinking of moving.

Workers involved in the rebuilding in Iraq have been openly threatened and may be moving out or to other locations until security improves.

Karbula and Bakuva came under mortar fire.

The atmosphere in Kurdish areas, where the people are all very much pro-coalition forces, is completely different from Baghdad. The main problem is the fact that Ansar al-Islam members are entering the country through the mountains from Iran.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

The following is an excerpt from a letter sent to the US Consul in Baghdad. The writer asked that his experience be shared:

I had some trouble when I left Baghdad, not necessarily life threatening, but I can't know for sure because I escaped. However, others (non American) in my group experienced a life threatening situation in Basra. I thought I would bring these two unfortunate events to your attention so everyone understands that even travel in a 'caravan' (convoy) is dangerous.

A week earlier I came from Dubai to Umm Qasr by ferry boat, and then by car through Basra to Baghdad. I was in a party of six; four Romanians, one Iraqi-Romanian and myself. While we were in Baghdad, I felt safe, despite sniper fire during the nights. Persons blew up a telecommunications centre and the Jordanian Embassy while I was there, but for some reason I still felt safe. Stupidity combined with denial, I guess. I spent a busy week in Baghdad and when it came time to leave, I decided to drive due west to the airport in Amman, Jordan, rather than face the 'slow boat' back to Dubai. The drive due south to Umm Qasr and the boat was six hours through Basra, then a three day boat trip to Dubai depending on the condition of the engines. In fact, the boat trip took 5 days for some of my friends – more on that later. The alternative route through Amman meant that I could be back in my office in Bucharest in just one to one and half days.

I decided to hire a car and a driver for the 14 hour drive to Jordan. I was picked up at the Palestine Hotel at 0500hrs. On the edge of Baghdad we joined others and formed a 'caravan' (convoy) of seven GMC Suburbans. I did not know my fellow travellers, I was alone in my car with my driver. We sped along at 170-180km/h because the highway was similar to an autobahn in Germany. Six lanes in total (3 each way in perfect condition), guard rails on all sides and doubled in the middle. As will become apparent, the modern guard rails penned the cars to one side of the road. There were hundreds of kilometres of fencing to keep animals off the highway, but most of it had been stolen.

An hour outside of Baghdad, my driver awoke me and started telling me a story about Ali Baba. In my profound ignorance, I thought I was being given a history lesson from 1001 Arabian Nights perhaps because we were geographically close to some important spot. Five minutes later, I knew what he really meant. Two (perhaps more, I couldn't see) bandits with

machine guns blocked the road, and all seven cars began fishtailing all over the highway. I thought we were going to end up in a huge pile up. I was in the sixth vehicle in this convoy. I later learnt that the generic Ali Baba meant 'bandit'.

My driver was terrific. Somehow, we avoided a high speed crash into the others. As soon as stopped, he put the vehicle in reverse and drove at a maximum speed backwards for at least 3km. I thought the engine was going to seize. The driver finally spun the car around and we sped off at high speed on the wrong side of the highway for about 20-30km facing oncoming trucks. I asked why we were continuing at such a high rate of speed. He said he was afraid that some of the bandits might chase us. I was beginning to understand. As it turned out, my driver left his brother, another driver in one of the five cars captured by the bandits. We later heard at a gas stop that the bandits took luggage, passports, money, computers, everything from the last five cars in the convoy. Only the 6th car (mine) and 7th car managed to escape. One man who was travelling with his daughter foolishly told the bandits that he had no money, the bandits said, OK, we'll take your daughter instead. Allegedly the man then turned over USD5,000.

We also heard that in a convoy two hours earlier than ours, two armed guards in the lead vehicle were killed by the bandits, because they tried to resist. The bloody car was allegedly returned to Baghdad with the bodies. Apparently, my driver learned of this before our convoy left. Perhaps this is why he was so nervous and prepared when we encountered the bandits. Unfortunately, I knew none of this before we left Baghdad. I made it safely to Jordan but I had to wait in 50-55 degree C heat at the Iraqi-Jordanian border for 3 hours. It was unbearable, especially for old women in black robes and babies that looked half dead slumped (asleep, unconscious?) in their mother's arms. Brutal. No care for humanity. My impression of Jordan went down several notches, but these are very difficult and dangerous times.

Despite all of this I was lucky. The other five people in my group decided that the trip to Amman was too dangerous and decided to go south to Umm Qasr through Basra instead. Somehow, they got into a traffic jam in Basra surrounded by a crowd of angry Iraqis. There was a British skirmish earlier in the day that left two Iraqis dead and Iraqis wounded at the hands of British troops. Things got out of hand, and the British abandoned the city until things "cooled down". One in five of my initial group is an Iraqi national who has been living in Bucharest for the past 24 years. In fact he was visiting his family for the first time after this long period. He speaks Arabic fluently. Ultimately he saved their lives.

A crowd of 70 men surrounded their car shouting, "Kill the British!" The Iraqi got out of the car and tried to calm the crowd, unfortunately, one of the Romanian nationals also got out of the car and tried to use his satellite telephone. Someone in the crowd seized the phone. The Romanian misunderstood the situation and began shouting at the Iraqi who took it. The Romanian-Iraqi told him to shut up because he was trying to save all their lives. In the end, they turned over money and their driver abandoned them on the street after telling the crowd to shoot them because he had no interest in them.

They managed to obtain another car to take them to the port, but only after they suspected that the driver was about to deliver them somewhere else. They forced him to turn around and go to Umm Qasr. It was very tense, they then spent 5 days on the Arabian Sea sailing to Dubai because, indeed, one of the engines was dead. There was trouble with the engine when we travelled from Dubai to Umm Qasr.

If the Romanians didn't have the Iraqi with them, they would all be dead (in the opinion of the Romanian-Iraqi). Imagine if I was travelling with them as an American! Like I said, I was lucky. I won't go back in Baghdad until I can be assured of a flight direct into the city.

No-one should underestimate the danger on the roads. You may tell my story to the town meeting if you wish. American bravado and a misplaced sense of vulnerability have no place in today, Iraq.

A few other observations from my trip:

The Iraqis I met were all educated, polite, under pressure and dedicated to the cause of reform. They were friendly towards Americans and British and believed that the media was not balanced in reporting their true feelings. Despite their education and worldliness, extreme

religious prejudice is everywhere, it is a powder keg.

The heat was unbelievable, I can't understand how our young men and women in uniform can endure, let alone function with their battle gear.

I witnessed a middle class Iraq.

Shop keepers were polite and engaging even if you bought nothing. The market is meeting the demand, for example, I found obscure computer cables that I could not find in Bucharest. The shops are full of goods.

Cash is king, credit cards are useless and banks do not exist.

SUMMARY

It is easy to offer advice not to travel to Iraq due to the increase in violence and attacks; however, we have to remain realistic. **If operating or planning to operate in Iraq it is strongly advised:**

- **To review all security measures.**
- **Increase the security advisor personnel.**
- **Reduce the similarities between your equipment and any that coalition forces may be using.**
- **Give all staff a thorough security briefing.**
- **Employ a professional security advisor to travel with individuals and groups to locations in Iraq.**
- **Employ an advisor to coordinate all security, emergency plans, etc.**
- **A security plan including emergency evacuation plan should be in force.**
- **Establish good communications including a base station to improve distance and clarity.**
- **Essential individual and group first aid kits need to be purchased – ensure all know how to use contents.**

The number of threats to Westerners is of growing concern. Some media companies, aid agencies and businesses are still operating in Iraq without any safety and security advisors to assist them, inadequate first aid kits and run-down vehicles.

If anyone requires assistance, advisors, security plans, first aid kits, etc please contact Centurion or speak to our advisors on the ground in Iraq.

Many thanks to Centurion advisors in Iraq for providing information for this Field Report.