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KILLING FIELDS | BY NIR ROSEN

Iraq is the republic of fear, once again. If the religious militias don't get you, the resistance will, or the terrorists will, or the criminal gangs will, or the Americans will.

Sunday, May 28, 2006; Page B01

Every morning the streets of Baghdad are littered with dozens of bodies, bruised, torn, mutilated, executed only because they are Sunni or because they are Shiite. Power drills are an especially popular torture device.

I have spent nearly two of the three years since Baghdad fell in Iraq. On my last trip, a few weeks back, I flew out of the city overcome with fatalism. Over the course of six weeks, I worked with three different drivers; at various times each had to take a day off because a neighbor or relative had been killed. One morning 14 bodies were found, all with ID cards in their front pockets, all called Omar. Omar is a Sunni name. In Baghdad these days, nobody is more insecure than men called Omar. On another day a group of bodies was found with hands folded on their abdomens, right hand over left, the way Sunnis pray. It was a message. These days many Sunnis are obtaining false papers with neutral names. Sunni militias are retaliating, stopping buses and demanding the *jinsiya*, or ID cards, of all passengers. Individuals belonging to Shiite tribes are executed.

Under the reign of Saddam Hussein, dissidents called Iraq "the republic of fear" and hoped it would end when Hussein was toppled. But the war, it turns out, has spread the fear democratically. Now the terror is not merely from the regime, or from U.S. troops, but from everybody, everywhere.

At first, the dominant presence of the U.S. military -- with its towering vehicles rumbling through Baghdad's streets and its soldiers like giants with their vests and helmets and weapons -- seemed overwhelming. The Occupation could be felt at all times. Now in Baghdad, you can go days without seeing American soldiers. Instead, it feels as if Iraqis are occupying Iraq, their masked militiamen blasting through traffic in anonymous security vehicles, shooting into the air, angrily shouting orders on loudspeakers, pointing their Kalashnikovs at passersby.

Today, the Americans are just one more militia lost in the anarchy. They, too, are killing Iraqis.

Last fall I visited the home of a Sunni man called Sabah in the western Baghdad suburb of Radwaniya, where the Sunni resistance had long had a presence, and where a U.S. soldier had recently been killed. On Friday night a few days before I came, his family told me, American soldiers surrounded the home where Sabah lived with his brothers, Walid and Hussein, and their families and broke down the door. The women and children were herded outside, walking past Sabah, whose nose was broken, and Walid, who had the barrel of a soldier's machine gun in his mouth. The soldiers beat the men with

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rifle butts, while the Shiite Iraqi translator accompanying the troops exhorted the Americans to execute the Sunnis.

As the terrified family waited outside, they heard three shots from inside. It then sounded to them as though there was a scuffle inside, with the soldiers shouting at each other. Thirty minutes later the translator emerged with a picture of Sabah. "Who is Sabah's wife?" he asked. "Your husband was killed by the Americans, and he deserved to die," he told her. At that he tore the picture before her face.

Walid was then taken away, and inside the house the family found Sabah dead. His bloody shirt showed three bullet holes that went through his chest; two of the bullets had come out of his back and lodged in the wall behind him. Three U.S.-made bullet casings were on the floor. Sofas and beds had been overturned and torn apart; tables, closets, vases of plastic flowers, all were broken and tossed around. Even the cars had been destroyed. Photographs of Sabah had been torn up and his ID card confiscated. One photograph remained on his wife's bureau: Sabah standing proudly in front of his Mercedes.

I later asked Hussein if they wanted revenge. "We are Muslim, praise God," he said, "and we do not want revenge. He was innocent and he was killed, so he is a martyr."

Across town, U.S. troops had also raided the Mustapha Huseiniya, a Shiite place of worship in the Ur neighborhood. The Huseiniya, similar to a mosque, belonged to the nationalistic and anti-occupation Moqtada al-Sadr movement, and in front of its short tower were immense signs with images of the movement's important clerics. The Sadr militia, known as the Army of the Mahdi, had been using the Huseiniya as a base for counterinsurgency operations. Mahdi militiamen kidnapped Sunnis suspected of supporting the insurgency, tortured them until they confessed on video, and then executed them.

When the Americans raided the Huseiniya, they brought Iraqi troops with them. They killed not only Mahdi fighters but also innocent Shiite bystanders, including a young journalist I knew named Kamal Anbar, in what witnesses described to me as summary executions. Although neighbors blamed the U.S. troops, Iraqi troops were so laden with gear, flak jackets and helmets provided by the Americans, they were often indistinguishable.

When I visited the next morning, the Huseiniya's floors, walls and ceilings were stained with blood; pieces of brain lay in caked red puddles. Just as Shiites cheered when the Americans hit Sunni targets, Sunni supporters of the insurgency greeted news of the U.S. raid with satisfaction.

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