

Toy guns, a burned taxi, and daily life in Baghdad

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BAGHDAD - To Mahmoud, it was a child's game with a new toy gun. But to US soldiers driving past in their Humvee, the 11-year-old's squad of friends pointing their realistic assault rifles looked like a threat.

"I was holding the gun this way," enthuses Mahmoud, striking a heroic pose.

"Then they targeted me with their laser [gun sights]," he says, dragging a finger down his chest where the red beam lit him up. "I threw down my gun and ran away," he adds, tossing the plastic look-alike to the carpet and spilling a glass of soda.

"They came back, and their bodies were shaking," says Mahmoud's sister Hibba, 14.

"The [US military] interpreter warned them never to do that again, or they would be killed," intones the children's mother, Karima Selman Methboub, the sturdy matriarch and widow who manages a poor family of eight children in their small apartment in the Iraqi capital. "All of them," she adds with exasperation, "have these guns."

The episode is the latest adventure of the Methboub family, which the Monitor has followed since December 2002. Struggling under the same burdens as so many Iraqis, the Methboub family try to establish normal life as they navigate the urban war zone and insecurity of Baghdad more than two-and-a-half years after the fall of Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime.

The family gets by on Methboub's meager wages as a hotel cleaner, and those of a tea-boy son. Most everything is in short supply, from money to electricity. Plentiful are chronic fear and dark humor, however, which mask the daily disappointed hopes.

Take the three car bombs that shook this relatively safe Karrada neighborhood last June, bringing the war to the family's doorstep. One blast, beside a mosque across the street, was followed by another a few minutes later, which targeted police and those who came to the aid of the first bomb victims.

"We have been shocked very strongly," says Karima, adding that two neighbor children were killed, along with two other locals, beside the police casualties. "Some people had their legs and arms cut off," she says, shaking her head at the violence.

Even Hibba, standing on a neighbor's balcony, was hit in the right arm with a piece of shrapnel, which affected her ability to write. Now healed, she laughingly describes how her schoolmates nicknamed her Hibba Fragment.

The aftermath of the bombings provides a glimpse of the contradictions of wartime Iraq. An

American unit showed up. "[They] began to distribute water and military food, but it was expired, so all the people threw this away," recalls Amal, 16, who began about that time to write again in her wartime diary, to satisfy her "ambition to get my voice to the world."

The US troops asked their translator to take photos of them handing out the aid. "People wanted to kill the Americans' translator," says Amal.

"[The Americans] should be cautious about that," says Methboub. "They came to the exact same place where a lot of people were killed. They shouldn't do that."

The next day, on the wall of the damaged mosque were these words, written in blood by the insurgents: "We will come back to you." The family says they have learned to manage such threats, and a string of raids and some arrests by US and Iraqi troops have eased local concern. But some threats are just too close to home to ignore.

Daughter Zainab, 17, recently married Ali, a former Iraqi soldier who joined the nascent police force - the institution of the new Iraq most heavily targeted by insurgents. Despite several threats, he kept with the force. But when a fellow cop's wife was shot dead days after that policeman ignored a death threat, Ali took seriously the next threat he received and left his job immediately. Zainab, who now lives with Ali, no longer goes to high school for fear that she could be killed or kidnapped.

"The police chief told him: 'If we say we can protect you, we would be lying,' " says Methboub, noting that six or seven of Ali's associates have been assassinated. He continues with security work, but his new job may be even more dangerous.

"What else can he do?" laments Methboub. "Where can he get money?" Lack of money is again plaguing the family, whose furnishings appear today more Spartan than at any point in the last year - and not unlike their prewar situation, when they sold furniture to pay school fees.

Son Mohamed, 20 - convicted of stealing cars before the war and a one-time Abu Ghraib inmate - finally landed work as a taxi driver. But after just a month on the job, the car he was using burned when a horse cart full of gasoline cans collided with a minibus carrying bank staff. The grey carcass of Mohamed's taxi was pushed to a trash heap by the side of the Abu Nuwas road - a \$1,500 hole in the pocket of a family that worries about the slightest rise in the price of bread and tomatoes.

"The police are keeping the horse," says Methboub. "We are trying to convince them to give it to us, so we can sell it."

Suddenly a crackle surges through the room and Methboub exclaims: "Electricity!" Hibba reaches for the light switch, and twin sister Duha turns on the television and surfs between satellite channels.

Amal retrieves a poem from the bedroom called "Identity of the Iraqi" that she wrote for school, which portrays a cynicism that didn't exist when Amal returned from a visit to South Korea after

the war, funded by Monitor readers' donations.

"The Iraqi is a despised living creature, abused in the media and scatterbrained, [poor] and oppressed by government," she reads, giggling shyly. Her Iraqi is emotionally devastated, "frozen by cold in winter," tantalized by a brief hope that gas and propane are available.

"He is psychologically insane," Amal concludes, "and daily suffers catastrophe." The literary reverie is broken by the sound of Mahmoud and friend Mortada, playing war in the hallway with their toy guns. Plastic pellets bounce off the TV and the walls, and roll across the carpet.

"Now, get out from my house!" shouts Methboub to the boys, in a useless bid to quiet them.

"One day, all the children started to play with marbles; then it was soccer," philosophizes Amal. "Now is the day of the guns."

"I hate them - we don't have money to buy such things," says Methboub, noting that Mahmoud bought his fake assault rifles with his own money, given for the religious holiday of Eid.

"When school starts," the mother vows, "I will break them."