

Baghdad shakes to the rumble of B-52s

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All night, you could hear the carpet-bombing by the B-52s. It was a long, low rumble, sometimes for minutes. The targets, presumably the Republican Guards, must have been 30 miles away but, each time that ominous, dark sound began, the air pressure changed in the room where I'm staying near the Tigris river. I've put some flowers in a vase near the window and the water in it was gently shaking all night as the vibrations came out of the ground and air. God spare anyone under that, I thought.

"When we have our soldiers at the front," Tariq Aziz, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister, had told us hours earlier, "you don't expect us to line them up for you to shoot at, do you?" We had laughed merrily but I didn't laugh now. Surely Saddam Hussein's praetorian guard could not be sitting this out in the desert, tanks abreast, soldiers out in the open? So what were the B-52s aiming at?

From time to time, I poked my head out of the window. Far away to the south-west, there would come a pale, dangerous red glow, sometimes for a second, sometimes for five seconds, a glow that would grow to perhaps a square mile then suddenly evaporate, its penumbra moving back into darkness. The forward US Marines were, so the BBC told the world in the early hours yesterday, only 60 miles from Baghdad. I could believe it.

The long hours of darkness are difficult for Iraqis. They play cards. They sleep when the silence between air raids allows. I'm reading by night a biography of Sir Thomas More that becomes more perilously appropriate to this fearful drama. Only a few hundred yards from my bedroom is a massive statue of President Saddam, right arm upraised in greeting to his ghostly people, left hand smartly at his side, as if on parade.

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The young Thomas More would have understood its meaning. A tyrant, he wrote, is a man who allows his people no freedom, who is “puffed up by pride, driven by the lust of power, impelled by greed, provoked by thirst for fame”.

Yet yesterday morning, 20 miles from Baghdad, ordinary Iraqis, without the presence of the “minders” who dog our heels, spoke of George Bush in just such language. I was standing on what may soon become the Baghdad front line, perhaps 10 miles from the B-52 bombings, 30 miles from the nearest US Marines, and behind me coils of black smoke were towelling into the sky from the burning oil berms. A ferocious storm was blasting sand into our faces, turning the sky a dark, bloody orange, the ground shaking gently as the B-52s came back.

A senior Iraqi business executive wanted to explain how slender was the victory the Americans were claiming. “Throughout history, Iraq has been called Mesopotamia,” he said. “This means ‘the land between the two rivers’. So unless you are between the two rivers, this means you are not in Iraq. General Franks should know this.” Alas for the businessman, the US Marines were, as we spoke, crossing the Euphrates under fire at Nasiriyah yesterday as hundreds of women and children fled their homes between the bridges. But still, by yesterday evening, only 50 or so American tanks had made it to the eastern shore, into “Mesopotamia”. It didn’t spoil the man’s enthusiasm.

“Can you imagine the effect on the Arabs if Iraq gets out of this war intact?” he asked. “It took just five days for all the Arabs to be defeated by Israel in the 1967 war. And already we Iraqis have been fighting the all-powerful Americans for five days and still we have held on to all of our cities and will not surrender. And imagine what would happen if Iraq surrendered. What chance would the Syrian leadership have against the demands of Israel? What chance would the Palestinians have of negotiating a fair deal with the Israelis? The Americans don’t care about giving the Palestinians a fair deal. So why should they want to give the Iraqis a fair deal?”

This was no member of the Baath Party speaking. This was a man with degrees from universities in Manchester and Birmingham. A colleague had an even more cogent point to make. “Our soldiers know they will not get a fair deal from the Americans,” he said. “It’s important that they know this. We may not like our regime. But we fight for our country. The Russians did not like Stalin but they fought under him against the German invaders. We have a long history of fighting the colonial powers, especially you British. You claim you are coming to ‘liberate’ us. But you don’t understand. What is happening now is we are starting a war of liberation against the Americans and the British.”

Now the businessman wanted to talk of President Saddam. “We Arabs care about dignity,” he said. “Half of Lawrence’s ‘Seven Pillars of Wisdom’ is about Arab dignity.

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In our lands, populism won over democracy for historical reasons. Saddam has provided societal safety. I am safe providing I do not confront the regime. Saddam may be very severe against political dissidents but he is also very severe on criminals or anyone who is aggressive with us. That includes the Americans.”

Vice-President Taha Yassin Ramadan was more rhetorical yesterday. He talked of the “perfidious aggression and invasion”, and demanded that the Arab states use an oil boycott against the US and Britain, that at least they withdraw their ambassadors from their embassies in Washington and London. Some hope.

Mahomed Saleh, the Trade Minister, accused Kofi Annan, the secretary general of the UN, of bowing to US pressure to prevent ships carrying supplies under the oil-for-food programme from landing in Iraq – “We don’t need humanitarian assistance,” he said – and insisted the Iraqi government was sending 20 trucks loaded with flour to Basra every day. British shellfire, he claimed, had set fire to a warehouse containing flour.

But other stories from the south were worrying the Iraqis yesterday. How, for example, did the 100 Iraqis lying along 10 miles of roadway north of Nasiriyah come to be killed? A French correspondent has described the smell of burnt flesh as he passed them, adding that he could not tell if they were soldiers or civilians. What happened to these dead people, the Iraqis are asking themselves? Almost every war in the Middle East ends in a massacre, a ghastly routine that weighs heavily on everyone’s mind.

By dusk last night, the air pressure was changing again as the B-52s returned. In Baghdad, ever mindful of advice, I laid hands on apples and bananas to wolf by my bedroom window. I shall be back to the biography of Thomas More again. But I am possessed of a strange thought. That if the war is still going on when I reach the end of this book, if the bombing and the shelling is continuing when Thomas More has his head chopped off, then it is likely that General Tommy Franks’ head will roll too. ♦