

Report from Suleimaniya

Mines, Smuggling and Other Matters

March 6, 2011

We were sitting in the thick walled stone house of a farmer, Muhammed, just a few metres off the main road leading to Iran, about 20 kilometres from the Iraqi border post. Outside snow was falling in soft wet flakes but we were comfortably seated on carpets with pillows at our backs sipping hot tea. At this time in early March the mountains above us were all covered in snow.

The conversation had already gone past the usual discussions about farming, bemoaning the lack of government support for farmers and the ineffectiveness of farm organizations because of the leaders' ties to partisan politics. We had also learned that the whole area is laced with land mines and unexploded cluster bombs that had been put in place by the Iraqi central government during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980's. It had also been established that artillery shelling from the Iranian base within Iraq's border was making life difficult and dangerous for farmers.

The discussion turned away from farming to the protests in Suleimaniya. We soon learned that Muhammed was, and is, also a sergeant in the Peshmerga. The Peshmerga is the largest militia force in the Kurdish region numbering in the range of 150,000 men that can be called into service. To call this fighting force a militia and not an army seems to make little sense except for the fact that some of the units are loyal to Barzani and his KDP party and others are loyal Talabani and his PUK party. So the Peshmerga forms a considerable fighting force when they are united in defense of the Kurdish Region in Iraq. But if partisan disputes break out that turn violent then units of the Peshmerga can end up fighting against each other. The united Peshmerga forces actually captured the cities and surroundings of Mosul and the oil rich Kirkuk from Saddam Hussein's army in 2003. The US had not been able to launch a northern attack against Hussein because they had not reached agreements with Turkey. Muhammed had taken part in that campaign. He commented that the Peshmerga forces had handed those cities over to the Americans who did a very bad job of restoring order or re-establishing services. It is worth noting here that the Peshmerga forces have recently moved into Kirkuk again, for what reasons we can guess, but Kirkuk clearly is predominantly Kurdish. The central government in Baghdad is none to pleased with this development in that oil rich area.

In reference to the protests, Muhammed first commented on the shootings in front of the KDP offices on February 17. He said that the Peshmerga had warned Suleimaniya city police of impending trouble from protestors and advised them to have riot gear on hand to prevent it. The advice had been ignored so Peshmerga guards had every right to shoot because AK47's were the only weapons they had. He talked about the land mine problem, pointing out that, since the former Baghdad regime had put them in place, the present central government should be responsible for removing them and that pressure from the US government should be brought to bear on the problem. He told us that the central Iraqi government has an agreement to fund the Peshmerga forces but it is only funding enough for about 80,000 troops, roughly half the actual numbers of soldiers in the Peshmerga. To make matters worse

the Peshmerga is being sent old equipment while the central government is purchasing jet planes and tanks. Given the past history of attacks on the Kurdish population from Baghdad governments Muhammed wonders who this fire-power might be used against. Given the American concerns that terrorist groups might be infiltrating the area, some US military trainers were sent in to assist the Peshmerga in identifying and destroying terrorist cells. To say that Muhammed considered the training useless might be giving the benefit of the doubt to value of the training. Muhammed still patrols the border area keeping watch for potential enemies of the Kurdish region. He strongly believes that it is Barzani and the KDP that will protect and strengthen the Kurdish region with the use of lethal force when it is deemed necessary. He claimed his wife was a supporter of Talabani's PUK party.

From Muhammed's home we proceeded up the road to the Iraqi border point with Iran where we hoped to get a glimpse of the Iranian army outpost. Along the way we saw paths leading off the road. Our translator told us that those were trails to Iran used by smugglers carrying goods back and forth between Iran and Iraq. Apparently the major product going into Iran is wine and spirits for people that cannot obtain alcoholic beverages legally in that strict Muslim country. One can imagine the smugglers are well protected by the land mines that must still lie along their trails. The road at the border point was a glare of ice from wet snow and the Iranian outpost was hidden in cloud and falling snow. It would be a pretense to suggest that our little band of peacemakers is not dealing with armed people here in the border area. There is an old saying that the only friends the Kurds have are the mountains. That might be amended to say that the only friends of the Kurds are the mountains and AK47's.

This border area is a world away from Sulemaniya, a city of one million people with schools, hospitals, transit systems and universities. The protests in support of a peaceful end to government corruption and human rights abuses makes little sense to mountain men trained for combat. I think Muhammed, the rugged soldier and farmer would be a great hit with my conservative friends that I meet at the Sunset Diner. As a leader for peaceful change toward real democracy, not so much.

Love, Allan