

WHY DO YOU KILL, ZAID? by Juergen Todenhoefer

Qur'an (5:32)

If anyone killed a person - unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it would be as if he had killed all mankind; and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he had saved the life of all mankind.

Zaid's Fear

Ramadi, August 2007. "I might as well go straight to Guantánamo and drop my family off in Abu Ghraib! I will not tell you my story."

Zaid is sitting in front of me in the gentle evening sunlight of Ramadi. He is 21 years old and an Iraqi resistance fighter. Zaid is tall and good-looking, with a fine moustache and thick black hair. His eyes are bright, alert and always in motion.

His youthful charm would probably turn the head of many an Iraqi girl, and most probably their mothers as well. But like most young Iraqi men, Zaid does not have a girlfriend. That might have been possible during the Saddam Hussein era, but since his fall the social rules have become stricter. The once secular country has become a state in which the first thing people did was reintroduce antiquated customs and ways, out of fear of Al-Qaeda and the death squads of radical Shi'ite politicians.

Zaid's face clouds over when I ask him to tell me about his life, especially about what he does as a fighter in the resistance, and to show me some photos. He looks at me distantly, his eyes are tired and sad. I sense that in his mind's eye he is reviewing his entire life.

Zaid puts his left hand to his brow and shakes his head: "Then I could buy myself a prison uniform at once. For the United States, we are all terrorists. They don't distinguish between terrorists who murder civilians and genuine resistance fighters, who are fighting to liberate their country. They have no idea about our dreams or our suffering. In their eyes, we are worthless. If they fail to get me, they will kill all my family instead. Just say that I am fighting in the resistance and that I have lost several family members. I cannot give you any details or photos. Or are you willing to go to Guantánamo instead of me?" Zaid has risen. His body language is too obvious to remain unnoticed; it too expresses a most emphatic "no."

I try to explain that I am also taking risks by visiting Iraq. But that does not seem to interest Zaid. "We can trade places anytime," he says coolly, and turns towards the gate of the small garden in which we are sitting.

As he reaches the gate, he turns and says softly, "I will think about it again tonight. And you should think about how you can help my family if something happens to them because of your book." Then he disappears into the dusk of Ramadi.

Journey to the Border

The night before that first meeting with Zaid my alarm clock went off at two o'clock in my hotel room in Damascus. Still half asleep I try to turn it off, but I cannot find it. In the meantime my second alarm clock starts to ring shrilly. I had placed it far from my bed as a precaution.

I give up. I know I have to get up. I plan to set off for the Iraqi border in one hour's time. Two in the morning is a horrible time to get up for someone who loves to sleep in. At home I would roll over and go back to sleep, and then go to the office around nine.

But I know I have to go back to Iraq. Not as an "embedded journalist" with the US occupying forces. I do not want to see the country through the eyes of the occupiers, or from the perspective of a reporter holed up in Baghdad's Green Zone. I want to see Iraq through the eyes of the victims and of the resistance.

One hour later — after downing a large pot of coffee — I am in an old yellow taxi with a wrinkly-looking Syrian driver, who I soon discover does not speak a word of English. I try to tell him I want to go to the Al Tanf crossing on the Syrian-Iraqi border.

He turns round in dismay. "Al Tanf?" he repeats while making a gesture with the edge of his hand that means, "They will cut your throat there!" I reply: "Yes, Al Tanf! Yallah!" which means: "Let's go!"

The driver shakes his head as we set off. It is just after three in the morning. It is amazing how much traffic is on the roads in Damascus at such an early hour.

The first street traders start to lay out their wares on the sidewalks. Butchers, having completed their slaughtering, open their shops. We drive past a Christian church. Its brightly illuminated cross shines over the entire neighbourhood. We head southeast along Damascus's imposing city wall, which is more than 2,000 years old.

I take the SIM card out of my mobile phone - just in case. The easiest way to locate somebody nowadays is via his cell phone. And nobody needs to know exactly where I am during my stay in Iraq. After 10 kilometres we reach the Sayyida Zainab mosque. Next to its exquisite olive green tiled minarets is an ugly rundown building, and that is where we have to apply for a permit to travel to the Iraqi border. The Syrians do everything they can to make it hard to travel to Iraq. The accusations by the United States administration that Syria supports the Iraqi resistance are having an effect.

We first have to wake up the public servants of the Syrian state, who are sleeping, wrapped in dark blankets, on wooden camp beds in front of the building. With much grumbling and growling they finally issue our permit. When they look at my passport and see that I am German, they shake their head in disbelief. Mumbling something I cannot understand, they hand back my passport and go back to bed. And from the mosque, the muezzin makes his first call to morning prayers.

At about seven a.m. we reach Al-Shahmma, a god-forsaken town 70 kilometres from the border. This is where I am to meet Abu Saeed, a trader from Ramadi, who will escort me across the border. Iraqi contacts I had met during Whitsuntide in Jordan put me in touch with him.

Abu Saeed is waiting for me at the edge of town in a dark blue Chevrolet SUV with tinted windows. With him are his wife Aisha, their 13-year-old daughter Shala, four-year-old son Ali and his driver Musa. They had come from Iraq the night before, managing to cross the border just before it closed at 10 p.m.. They spent the night together in the SUV.

Abu Saeed speaks English fluently, and we hit it off straightaway. He is 40 years old and with his Iraqi headdress looks like Peter O'Toole in the movie "Lawrence of Arabia". His wife Aisha, who is also 40, has gentle, almost European facial features. She is a pretty woman, and somehow managed to put on a little make-up in the crowded SUV. I tell her she looks like the great American movie star Rita Hayworth. She thanks me and smiles, although she certainly does not know who that is.

Abu Saeed studied history and wanted to become a diplomat. He owns a small trading company in Al Jazeera, a quarter of Ramadi. The company deals in construction materials and soft-drinks in the Iraq-Syria-Jordan border triangle.

Business is not good, he tells me, but he earns just about enough to look after his family. "We are alive," he says, "that is the most important thing, Alhamdulillah - praise be to God!"

Abu Saeed has four more children, but he left them at home in Ramadi. He only brought his wife, Shala and Ali along as protection for me, so that our

party would look like a family and they might deflect attention from me at checkpoints. Though I am wearing a white Iraqi dishdasha that reaches my ankles and a thin moustache, I still look pretty European.

We set off. It is 7.15 a.m.

Our 30-year-old driver Musa, a quiet Iraqi with a crew cut, drives almost the whole time at top speed. Abu Saeed sits next to him, with his young son Ali on his lap. His wife Aisha and their daughter Shala have made themselves comfortable in the back. In order not to fall asleep, Musa keeps playing cassettes of recitations from the Qur'an and fiery sermons. That not only keeps him wide-awake, but me too. Since I don't understand a word of Arabic, I cannot drum up much enthusiasm. Abu Saeed and his family fall asleep at once. They have, after all, had an exhausting night.

After three quarters of an hour driving through the Syrian desert, we are approaching Al-Tanf. The border post is in reality a five-kilometre long fortress, a sight that triggers memories of the old crossing at Helmstedt between East Germany and West Germany, as well as the Berlin Wall and high-security prisons. It is chilling, nightmarish and oppressive. Nowhere in the old Iraq of Saddam Hussein had I seen such grim looking walls and barriers.

For two hours we drive and walk from checkpoint to checkpoint. Musa hands out bribes the entire time - sometimes secretly under the cover of the hood, sometimes quite openly through the window. Usually 50 Syrian pounds, equivalent to about one dollar.

Some of the Syrian border police even give change, if one does not have the right bills. One border guard counts his big wad of bills, all bribe money, openly and with evident satisfaction, before giving us a big Syrian-Lira note as change. Al-Tanf is well known for its greedy border guards.

Despite the plentiful baksheesh, the checks are strict. Abu Saeed says I am a physician from Germany who wants to treat wounded children in Ramadi. But nobody believes him. Why would a German voluntarily go to Ramadi, and without the protection of the US army?

So we are taken to the official who deals with unusual cases. With a serious expression he tells us that, despite my Syrian and Iraqi visas, I may not enter the country. I would need special permission from the Syrian interior ministry.

We point out that I have a special permit from the Iraqi interior ministry, which is clearly much more important. It had taken me months to get it, and I do not want to believe that after all the hassle it turns out to be worthless ! The exchange becomes heated; the official is looking decidedly frosty. Bank

notes change hands. They are accepted with thanks. But the official doesn't change his mind.

We insist on speaking to his superior. With a shrug of his shoulders, he agrees. The superior appears, tired and yawning, and Abu Saeed explains to him with fervour how urgently the children of Ramadi need my help. It is only natural for me to want to experience the situation on the ground in Iraq first-hand. Abu Saeed talks and talks.

After a quarter of an hour the official capitulates. He says he has never seen a German come this way to get to Ramadi since the war began. But so be it! "Yallah, go with God, but go!" He leans back in his chair, exhausted. He wants to have his peace of mind and carry on dozing.

One can accuse the Syrians of many things, but not of making it easy to get into Iraq. Resistance fighters or terrorists who try to infiltrate Iraq from Syria must have a hard time crossing the border legally. Given the harsh conditions in the desert, to slip across the green border, which drowns here in a sea of yellowish sands, illegally is by any measure a dangerous enterprise. But it must be impossible to monitor every section of the 600-kilometer desert border between Syria and Iraq.

Due to the difficulties obtaining an official visa to Iraq, my contacts and Abu Saeed considered for several weeks whether they could smuggle me into Iraq illegally. But they decided against that option because it would have been too dangerous. And even if I had made it, I would have had no entry stamp in my passport. In Iraq, you can expect to be stopped by police or military at almost every crossroads, so I would have been arrested at the first checkpoint.

At 10.15 a.m. - we are still on Syrian soil - we are allowed to proceed along a slalom course of concrete blocks, sandbags and menacing shooting stands and onto a wide four-lane road. It is lined by high concrete walls and passes through five kilometres of no man's land to the Iraqi border.

To our right, between the road and the concrete wall, we see 50 or 60 pitiful tents bearing the logo of the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR. This is where a few hundred Palestinians who fled the Iraqi militias have become trapped. They have not fully escaped Iraq and are not welcome in Syria or anywhere else. They endure the searing heat - reduced to nobodies in no man's land.

We approach the Iraqi checkpoints. A sign bearing red letters on a white background greets us: "Do not attempt to cross the stop line or to bribe the border police. Do not enter the desert. Whoever disregards these orders will be arrested, interrogated and jailed."

The prospect of not having to pay bribes in Iraq is delightful, after our experiences in Syria. But the order not to go into the desert is superfluous. Faced with heavily armed control towers, shooting stands and the inhospitable desert, no normal person would for a moment consider such a foray.

By now, the temperature has risen to 48 degrees centigrade. The slalom resumes at a stop-and-go pace around barriers and shooting stands, and past several checkpoints. All around us are masked Iraqi soldiers and heavily armed American security personnel. I can't tell if they are Blackwater mercenaries, who have been active in ever greater numbers in the Iraqi security business.

But it does not really matter. Their fingers are resting on the trigger of their submachine guns; the security catches are released. There is clearly no interest in discussions about the meaning and significance of rules and regulations. We have finally arrived in the liberated Iraq.

The atmosphere is grim and threatening. Overlooking the checkpoints with their American security men poised to shoot, there is an observation tower about five or six meters in height. The barrel of a machine gun points menacingly out of a slot in its armoured glass cladding.

Again and again I have to get out and, with Abu Saeed's help, explain to the astonished Iraqi border guards why I want to enter their country. Our progress is slow. But we do not have to pay any bribes.

Two hours later, when we have finally persuaded the officials at the last American-Iraqi checkpoint to let us through, an Iraqi police officer who, like all the other border guards, no doubt considers me mad, cheerily calls out:

"Itwanso zean fil Iraq - Have fun in Iraq!" It is 12.30 p.m. now in Syria, and 1.30 p.m. in Iraq.

Journey to Ramadi

It has taken us four and a half hours to get across the border. A big sign-board in Arabic welcomes us: "AlIraq Yohibbikom - Iraq loves you." That remains to be seen, I think to myself as I open my third bottle of water for the day. Ahead of us is the highway through the desert to Ramadi, and it is almost empty. How pleasing the open road can be after four hours of stop-and-go. It's just 490 kilometres to Ramadi.

The car's air conditioning is working hard but losing the battle against the enormous heat. Musa inserts another Qur'an cassette into the player, this time the Sura Abraham, as we speed down the highway at 160 kilometres an hour

through the endless desert of Iraq. The road is dead straight and cuts through a barren landscape of sand and stones. The road is lined with thousands of shredded tires that have burst in the heat - which often soars to 50 degrees or higher.

Every few kilometres there are burned-out vehicles on the side of the road. The highway is lined with the twisted wrecks of buses, trucks, cars and military vehicles - pierced by shrapnel holes, burnished by the sand whipped up by the fierce desert wind.

Long skid marks, huge oily patches and burn marks on the highway and beside it indicate that attacks, ambushes and battles occurred here not so long ago between American troops and Iraqi insurgents - tragedies with countless dead.

The occupying forces usually send in teams to clear up the scene quickly after battles, to remove evidence of American vulnerability. Here, they tried to move the wrecks as far as possible into the rocky desert. But they could not obliterate all the traces. The asphalt and the desert have a memory of their own.

The road from Al-Tanf to Ramadi is a car-bomb highway, a highway of death. An explosive device can go off at any moment, or a gun battle can erupt between insurgents and the occupying forces. To the traveller the burned-out wrecks are a constant testimony to this.

The journey becomes monotonous, as the same scenes recur: tire shreds, gutted and wrecked vehicles, oil patches, skid marks, desert and more desert and yet more desert - accompanied by verses from the Qur'an and heated sermons blaring out endlessly from the loudspeaker. Occasionally the monotony of the desert is interrupted when herds of sheep suddenly appear out of nowhere. They eat the desert's last meager shoots of grass, which only they can find.

Everyone is asleep, apart from the driver and me. Musa drives with great calm at top speed, listening to the Qur'an and writing text messages on his mobile phone with his right hand. He can't make phone calls here. The wireless coverage in this huge country is patchy and overstretched.

Suddenly, two helicopters appear, flying low above us. I start to take photos at once. Abu Saeed, who has just woken up, begs me to put my camera away.

Then a column of heavily armoured, sand-coloured American Humvees and armoured personnel carriers appears out of the blue, heading towards us on our side of the road. Bristling with weapons, they are heading right for us. A red warning light is flashing on the roof of the lead vehicle.

Musa slams on the brakes, throws his cell phone on to Abu Saeed's lap, swerves sharply to the right, and brings the SUV to a screeching halt at the edge of the road. Slowly the convoy of Humvees and tanks gets closer. Everyone in the car is wide-awake now.

I keep taking photos, even though Abu Saeed is yelling at me to stop at once. They shoot at anything suspicious, he says. The American military convoy is just meters away now. The machine guns on the Humvees and the tanks are pointing straight at us. I hide my camera in the net on the back of the driver's seat and wait.

The military vehicles are moving almost at walking speed as they get closer and then pass us by. I look at the faces of the soldiers staring at our vehicle. Abu Saeed is holding his young son tightly in his arms. He is as white as chalk. Then finally, after several minutes that feel like an eternity, they are gone and the scare is over.

Abu Saeed turns to me and says imploringly: "Doctor, please don't take any more pictures. It is too dangerous. Even through the darkened windows, the GIs can see they are being photographed. And they are quick to shoot."

While Abu Saeed is pleading with me, I notice a convoy of supply vehicles approaching on the opposite lane. It seems to stretch for kilometres. That must be why the military secured our lane and almost forced our Chevrolet into the ditch.

The lead vehicles in the convoy are armoured Humvees. And after every six trucks there is an armoured personnel carrier or another Humvee. The seemingly endless convoy is apparently headed for Jordan. The neighbouring country is a very important source of supplies for the occupying powers in Iraq.

Musa sets off again very slowly, no faster than the trucks coming the other way. Abu Saeed explains that that is a very important regulation. One has to maintain a distance of at least 150 meters when driving behind a military convoy and may not drive any faster than a convoy coming the other way. Any contravention of these rules is usually fatal – a fact that might explain some of the burned-out vehicles en route. It is 2 p.m., two more hours to Ramadi. The highway is again deserted.

Abu Saeed's Account of the Situation

Abu Saeed plans to introduce me to representatives of the Iraqi resistance over the next few days. I ask him if he belongs to the resistance. He laughs: "We are all members of the resistance, everyone in his own way – directly or indirectly. The people are the resistance. Everybody helps one way or

another, as in almost any occupied country. With money, or information, food, shelter – whatever is needed."

He is not a fighter, he tells me, but like all Iraqis he helps in whatever way he can. Though he only supports the "real resistance," and not the "terrorists" of Al-Qaeda or the Shi'ite politicians' militias.

I ask if all Iraqis really do support the resistance. Abu Saeed ponders for a moment: "If you take all of Iraq, including the Kurds, I would say 70 percent of the population certainly support the resistance."

Part of the political class, he continues, has come to terms with the occupiers – but not the people. There is a deep gulf now between the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people. Unlike the members of the government clinging to power, just about the entire population demands the withdrawal of the occupation forces. Iraq is like occupied France during the Second World War. Of course there are collaborators, but most people are on the side of the resistance, and feel they are part of the resistance.

"The Shi'ites as well?" I ask. Abu Saeed looks annoyed. The distinction between Sunnis and Shi'ites has been played up by the United States and Britain, he says. In Iraq, nobody used to be interested in who was Sunni and who was Shi'ite. Even in Basra, where almost everybody is Shi'ite, there is a strong national resistance, despite the politicians' powerful militias supported by Iran.

The same Qur'an holds true for both Shi'ites and Sunnis. The only difference worth mentioning is that later, after the death of Muhammad, Shi'ites only accepted descendants of the prophet's family as leaders of the Muslim community. The Sunnis, on the other hand, insisted that the leaders of their community, the caliphs, were to be chosen not on the basis of their descent but their political and religious qualifications. That is what led to the schism.

Abu Saeed enjoys displaying his knowledge of history. He is a Sunni, he continues, his wife a Shi'ite. That is completely normal in Iraq. He has never thought about whether that makes his children Sunni or Shi'ite. Even as a graduate of history, he is not aware of any rules that might apply in such a situation. And, in any case, nobody in Iraq cares. Even many Kurds in Baghdad and Mosul feel they are above all Iraqis, unlike some of their political leaders.

The West's attempt, he continues, to play the Sunnis and Shi'ites off against each other will fail. They are all Muslims. They are proud to be Muslims and Iraqis. Even during the war with Iran, Sunnis and Shi'ites fought side-by-side for years.

After the war with the United States in 1991, there was an uprising in the mainly Shi'ite south. However, it was not, as has often been claimed, an uprising by the Shi'ites against the rule of the Sunnis, but an attempt instigated by the United States and Iran to weaken and, if possible, topple Saddam.

In response, I ask Abu Saeed about the violence between Sunnis and Shi'ites that people around the world see on television every evening. You cannot just argue that away, I say. Abu Saeed retorts that people who blow themselves up in markets or in front of mosques are terrorists and murderers and have nothing to do with the Iraqi resistance. According to a recent report published on the Newsweek website, more than three quarters of suicide bombers come from abroad.

It is a diabolical game, he says, played by Al-Qaeda - funded by so-called charitable foundations in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states - the militias of Shi'ite politicians - often sponsored by Iran - and the intelligence agencies of certain countries with an interest in seeing Iraq break apart.

All three groups operate in the same way: by means of spectacular attacks they pit different population groups against each other. The Sunni Al-Qaeda attacks Shi'ite holy places and marketplaces; Shi'ite militias attack Sunni holy places and neighbourhoods; and foreign agents bomb both Sunnis and Shi'ites - only for their masters to then point with mock disdain at the Iraqis, who evidently "kill each other like savages."

Everybody in Iraq knows, Abu Saeed continues, that some of the attacks are staged by foreign agents. Even the Shi'ite militia leader Muqtada al-Sadr recently said in public that the attack on the famous Shi'ite Golden Mosque in Samarra in June 2007 was not the work of Iraqi Sunnis but the occupying powers.¹² And that is very interesting, as Muqtada al-Sadr is a protégé of Iran and himself bears responsibility for many attacks on Sunnis.

When I look at Abu Saeed in disbelief, because it all sounds too much like an Oriental conspiracy theory, he pulls out of his pocket an article from an Arabic-language newspaper that cites that same Newsweek report. Reading it out, Abu Saeed says that of 139 suicide bombers who carried out attacks in Iraq, only 18 were Iraqis, while 53 were from Saudi Arabia, eight were from Italy, two each were from Belgium, France and Spain, and was one from Britain. That means 87 percent of the suicide bombings on the list were carried out by foreigners. U.S. forces officially confirmed a few days ago that between 80 and 90 percent of suicide attacks were carried out by foreign terrorists.

Abu Saeed has evidently read up on the issue. "Why," he asks me, "are you all taken in by the terrible game the United States and other powers are playing with Iraq? You fell for the lie about weapons of mass destruction, and now

you fall for the lie that the suicide bombers are Iraqi. Why are you so susceptible to U.S. propaganda?"

Abu Saeed speaks calmly, but he sounds resigned. "You have no idea what is going on in our country," he adds. For him, al-Zarqawi, the Al-Qaeda leader who was killed in June 2006, furthered the U.S. cause, if unwittingly, by being exactly what the American leadership wanted its ideal enemy to be: brutal, ruthless, inhuman.¹⁵ That allowed Bush to tell the American people again and again that he had to protect America from such people. In fact, al-Zarqawi, who was Jordanian, killed above all Iraqis. Why does nobody write that this murderer was a foreigner and not an Iraqi?

Although all the people of Ramadi have always opposed the American occupation, a few tribes agreed to a cease-fire with the Americans a few weeks ago, in order to drive the foreign al-Qaeda fighters out of town. That has been achieved to a large extent, Abu Saeed continues. Al-Qaeda wanted to make Ramadi its capital, but that attempt has failed.

The population and the resistance simply withheld any support. "As Mao Zedong knew, fish can only live in water. We took away the water, and dried them out." In spring 2007, the foreign al-Qaeda fighters were finally forced to leave Ramadi.

There weren't any major battles here, just a few local skirmishes involving the Iraqi police, the resistance, the American forces, and al-Qaeda. The media are blowing these confrontations out of all proportion and reporting them as heroic battles – like the one at Donkey Island near Ramadi, for example, on June 30, 2007, when about 30 al-Qaeda fighters were reportedly killed by U.S. units. But these are the kind of gun battles that unfortunately occur in Iraq every day. Al-Qaeda did not fail in Ramadi by losing a battle, but by losing the respect of the population because of its boundless brutality.

The defeat of al-Qaeda in Ramadi shows, Abu Saeed continues, how peace in Iraq can be restored one day. As soon as the American troops leave, the Iraqi resistance across the country can concentrate on al-Qaeda and the 100 or more militias, most of which are led by radical Shi'ite politicians, and a few by Sunnis. The resistance would only need a few weeks to solve the problem of terrorism. The Iraqi people would love to be rid of the terrorists.

I look at Abu Saeed sceptically, but he is convinced of his position. The fact that the people of Ramadi drove al-Qaeda out of town has given him a new sense of optimism.

Slowly, Abu Saeed dozes off. I am also feeling very tired. It is terribly hot in the aging Chevrolet. The air conditioning is no match for the outside temperature of 54°. It is just my luck that this is the hottest day of the year so far in Iraq.

Abu Saeed is now in a deep sleep, as are his wife Aisha, their daughter Shala and little Ali. I wish I could doze off too! All around us, desert, endless desert. It would be such a splendid landscape, if it were not for all the burned-out cars and reminders of the war.

I think back to my first two trips to Iraq in 2002 and 2003, a few weeks before the war began. I recall the beauty of the country and the boundless hospitality of the Iraqis I met back then, and also their anxious, even imploring looks when they asked me if I thought the imminent war could still be averted, and their silent resignation when I said the decision to go to war had probably long since been taken, whatever the outcome of the dispute over weapons of mass destruction.

I think of the children of Baghdad and Mosul, to whom our visit just before the invasion gave some glimmer of hope - hope that the war they were all talking about might prove to be just a bad dream. I think of all the Iraqis, to whom I promised to do everything in my power to lobby for a peaceful solution to the Iraq conflict - and of my helplessness, the helplessness of many journalists as they watched the American war machine lumbering down the wrong road, unable to deter it even for an instant with facts and arguments. How naive those efforts all were!

Zaid and the old man

Abu Saeed has woken up. This time he is the one to interrupt my train of thought. He wants to assure me once again that the Iraqi resistance categorically rejects violence against civilians. He turns to me and tells me about the plan in early 2007 to detonate a roadside bomb on Ishrin Street, one of the main streets in Ramadi, as a Humvee patrol passes by. Abu Saeed talks very quietly but with great intensity:

"One of my nephews, Zaid, was given the job of setting off the bomb. As the convoy approached, an old man sat down on a stone just opposite the spot where the bomb had been hidden. Zaid stared at him in dismay and waved to him from a distance to try to make him move. In just a few seconds he would have to trigger the detonation. Zaid started to shake and tears were trickling down his face. When the convoy was level with the bomb, he knew he had to set the bomb off at once.

But he did not activate the bomb. White as a sheet, he slowly opened his fist, careful not to touch the activator. He let the convoy pass unharmed.

He went to his comrades and handed them the activator without saying a word. They all embraced him because he had spared the old man. They said they would have acted exactly the same way and that it was right not to

detonate the bomb."

Abu Saeed turns away as he stops talking. "Can I meet Zaid?" I ask after a long silence. "You shall meet him," he says and falls silent again. But Zaid has caught my attention and I cannot get this young man out of my mind.

Abu Saeed's Story

After a while I ask Abu Saeed if he has lost any family members in the war. He bites his lip. Every family in Ramadi has lost somebody, he says. His eldest brother was detained two years ago on suspicion of being a resistance fighter. He has never returned, and his family now fears the worst.

Abu Saeed estimates that up to 40,000 Iraqis are locked away in American prisons. His eldest son, Saeed, who is 18, and his nephew Rashid were arrested in the winter of 2005 in Ramadi, also for allegedly fighting in the resistance. But neither of them was active in the resistance at the time.

First they were thrown into the American jail in Ramadi. They were beaten and kicked during their initial interrogations. To force a confession, they were not allowed any sleep for days on end. Saeed was released, but Rashid was transferred to Camp Bucca, one of the American prisons in Basra in the south of the country.¹⁸

Rashid, a lanky, quiet boy, spent eight months in Camp Bucca. When he came home, he was almost unrecognizable – so agitated, sick and haggard. In Camp Bucca, Abu Saeed continues, Rashid had to share a small tent with several other prisoners. The tent did not protect them against the cold wind and sand storms in winter or the brutal heat of summer.

On one occasion, Rashid failed to act on a guard's order immediately, so they took away his mattress and curtailed his toilet breaks. A short while later he came down with a bad case of flu and had a high fever, but to punish him further, they did not let him see a doctor. He was beaten and kicked repeatedly. After Rashid came home, it took his parents weeks to build up his strength again.

The wounds on his body have healed, but those on his soul will stay with him forever. After his stay in Camp Bucca, Rashid immediately joined the resistance. Young people in the West would probably do the same, says Abu Saeed.

Up to 80,000 Iraqis are being held in Iraqi government prisons, often in overcrowded quarters. In Jadariya prison, for example, at times 180 people were crammed into a space of 200 square meters. They had to take it in turns to lie down and sleep because there was so little room. The sanitary

conditions in the prisons are indescribable.

The American occupiers hand over resistance fighters they find particularly troublesome to the notorious Iraqi interior ministry, which mercilessly hounds opponents of the government. Those held by the ministry are almost always tortured, and many are killed. Their bodies turn up every few days in dozens, or even in hundreds, on the outskirts of Baghdad, in rubbish dumps or in the Tigris. They are so mutilated they are unrecognizable. Abu Saeed says he fears that is what may have happened to his elder brother. The American occupiers turn a blind eye to these killings by the Iraqi authorities, because American law does not permit them to execute Iraqi prisoners themselves. At any rate, the United States has not undertaken any significant steps to stop such killings.

When I voice my doubts about his interpretation of events, Abu Saeed responds bitterly. In a hushed voice he tells me that in Iraq there are "well over a hundred American and Iraqi Guantánamos." This is just one of the many hidden tragedies in his country. The Red Cross and human rights organizations have issued several detailed reports on these camps, but the Western media are evidently not interested. The prisoners in Iraq's Guantánamos are in a much worse state than those in the camp on Cuba.¹⁹ Among the thousands of people seized from their homes by the Americans, usually at night, there are many old or disabled people, and even children. Many are held in tents, like Rashid, or containers or even in latrines. Their life is hell, says Abu Saeed.

Women are also often thrown in jail, he continues. The idea is that they are likely to inform on members of their family in order to be released. Many are raped in the American and the Iraqi prisons. Men are raped too. Sometimes, female prisoners are forced to watch men being raped. Abu Saeed says he can introduce me to people in Amman or Damascus who have witnessed such disgusting crimes.

A well-known member of the Iraqi parliament recently states that in 2006 there were 65 proven cases of rape committed against young women in American and Iraqi prisons. The real number is probably much higher.

In Iraq's Guantánamos, the Iraqis learn that in the eyes of the West they are worthless. Abu Saeed says he and many of his friends will never forget the words of the highest-ranking American jailer, General Geoffrey Miller who said Iraqi prisoners should be treated "like dogs" and never allowed to believe at any point that they are anything "more than a dog."

Abu Saeed turns away and lovingly strokes the head of his little son. He clearly doesn't want to talk anymore. Perhaps he is right: What is the use of him talking and me writing about all this?

After a long pause I ask him again if any members of his family have been killed. Abu Saeed, this good-natured, friendly Iraqi businessman, becomes even more serious. He thinks long and hard whether to tell me, and what to tell me.

Then, without turning towards me, he says four of his relatives were shot and killed in 2003, shortly after the invasion, in a helicopter attack. They were going for a walk beside the Euphrates, which runs through Ramadi. The pilot probably suspected they wanted to bury bombs in the river bank. But all they were doing was going for an afternoon stroll.

Abu Saeed stares straight ahead. He clearly does not want me to see his stony expression. In April 2004, American aircraft dropped a bomb on the house of one of his nephews – in retaliation for an attack by resistance fighters. The nephew, his wife and their two small children were killed instantly.

In August 2005 his favourite uncle, Ahmad, was shot and killed in gunfire from a passing Humvee and his son seriously wounded. The U.S. troops placed Ahmed's body in front of the family's home 20 days later. That same month, two other relatives were killed by American snipers as they were irrigating their fields.

Abu Saeed says he lives in Al-Jazeera, a very pretty part of Ramadi. During Ramadan, the month of fasting, in 2005, 16 members of his immediate family were in the mosque there for prayers one night. After prayers, the 16 men were chatting in the doorway, when suddenly the mosque was bombed by an American plane. The huge force of the explosion tore his relatives to pieces. They were killed instantly. Parts of their bodies were strewn across the road and the neighbouring gardens, and were even hanging in the branches of the trees that surround the mosque.

Such reckless attacks on mosques by occupying forces are not unique to Ramadi. Once, after a bomb went off in Baghdad, an imam called for blood donors over the loudspeaker. The Americans responded by sending in helicopters to bomb the mosque and shooting the imam.

Abu Saeed has been so calm until now, but suddenly he starts to cry, and his whole body heaves as he sobs. Little Ali, who had been asleep, now looks at me reproachfully. He must think I said something nasty to his father. With his tiny hands, Ali tries to stroke his father's face. I am angry at myself tormenting Abu Saeed with my painful questions. And Abu Saeed seems to be angry at himself because he cannot hold back the tears.

Almost with an air of defiance, he continues after a while: The reason the Americans gave for the bombing raid was that the district where the mosque was located supported the resistance. But on that basis one could bomb all of Iraq to smithereens, says Abu Saeed. He takes several deep breaths. He does

not want to show that he is still fighting back the tears. He again stares straight ahead.

Western politicians are strange heroes, he resumes. They protest in Moscow and Beijing against human rights abuses, but in Washington they remain silent. More than 50 members of his extended family have been killed, including several youngsters who had their whole lives ahead of them. He and his wife, Abu Saeed says, have long since stopped counting the dead. Do I still want to know why almost all Iraqis support the resistance? I shake my head.

Al-Jazeera, the island

In the distance I see palm groves. Ramadi, surrounded by palm trees? That is not at all how I had imagined the former stronghold of Al-Qaeda in the war-torn Sunni triangle. Everyone in the car is awake now. Ali rubs his eyes and looks up to see if his father is all right again. Shala looks a little grumpy as she stretches and then smoothes down her hair.

We cross the dark-blue Euphrates. Musa has taken his foot off the accelerator and we coast towards the first checkpoint. A group of masked Iraqi police officers has installed a machine gun in the burned-out wreck of a car. One of them points his weapon at Musa's window. When he sees my German passport, the whole palaver begins again.

The tension dissipates when the masked officer asks Abu Saeed how much he wants for me. Anbar province, of which Ramadi is the capital, is notorious for smuggling, highway robbery and kidnappings. Abu Saeed answers dryly, "You can't afford him."

With a shrug, Musa closes his window.

We again negotiate a slalom course around concrete walls, gun emplacements, and barbed wire barriers. On our right is an imposing watch tower camouflaged with nets. Machine guns peep out of its window. It is the American headquarters in Ramadi, in one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces. After the fall of Baghdad, the Iraqi dictator first set up camp in Ramadi. "Put your camera down!" Abu Saeed hisses as I try to take photos of this sinister-looking building towering over all the others.

We turn down a dusty unpaved road lined with tall date palms to get to Al-Jazeera, a village-like oasis on the edge of Ramadi where Abu Saeed and his family live. The name means 'island.' In front of us, there are more road blocks and masked policemen.

Musa stops in a small alley. Abu Saeed whispers to me, "get out at once. The neighbours mustn't see you." I walk quickly through a large metal gate into a small garden. I see a single-storey house built of rough grey stones stuck together with white cement. This is where Abu Saeed's family lives, together with the family of his younger brother Abu Hamid. The centre of Ramadi is just a stone's throw away on the other side of the Euphrates.

The garden is full of cheerful, laughing children. In Iraq, school is out for the summer from July until September. Two of the little ones have tied empty plastic water bottles under their arms. That means they want to go swimming in the river. But it takes more than two hours to get to the Euphrates because of all the barriers. It used to take just 10 minutes. They won't be taking a refreshing dip in the river today. But they can still dream of going swimming.

The older children are watching television with their parents in a baking hot reception room. A few days earlier Iraq's national football team had just won the Asian Cup for the first time ever. The family watch in awe and disbelief as the goals are shown again and again on Iraqi television.

The Iraqi national squad is made up of Shi'ites and Sunnis, Arabs and Kurds. The decisive goal in the final against Saudi Arabia was shot by Younes Mahmoud, who is a Sunni, after a corner by Hawar, who is a Kurd. Midfielder Karrar Jassim is a Shi'ite. "If we stick together, we can achieve anything," says Abu Saeed, as he discreetly wipes away a tear. He is not the only member of his family to be seen crying.

By now almost all the men, boys and girls have gathered in the reception room. It is a good opportunity for me to unpack the medical supplies I have brought from Germany as a gift for my hosts. My Iraqi friends from Baghdad, as well as Abu Saeed, had asked me to pretend to be a doctor as long as possible. Should there be any complicated cases, Abu Saeed promised he would call on a doctor he knows in Ramadi for assistance.

The children look impressed as I explain to Abu Saeed what the different medicines in my medicine chest are for. But when I say they have to be kept cool, everybody starts to laugh.

There is electricity from the municipality for only a few hours each day. And the old generator in the house rarely runs for more than an hour without breaking down. And fuel has become so expensive in Iraq that the family could not afford to keep the generator running day and night. Before the American invasion, a litre of gas cost between one and two cents. Now it costs between 40 cents and a dollar. In some towns, Baquba, for example, the price of one litre has reached two dollars. Baquba is only 100 kilometres from Iraq's second biggest oil field.

It is 6 o'clock in the evening. It has become so hot indoors that everybody goes out into the garden. The huge palm trees cast long shadows. I go to the bathroom and take a shower. The sun has heated up the water in the metal tank so much that I almost burn myself. Still I have rarely enjoyed a shower so much. I go back into Abu Saeed's garden and feeling relaxed, sit down on one of the white plastic chairs.

The garden is made up of a lawn about 20 meters long and 15 meters wide, framed by narrow flower beds. The children find a football without much air in it and start to play with their bare feet. Five boys aged about 10 are pitted against three young men of about 20. The older team can hardly keep up with the young boys who compensate for their physical inferiority with all kinds of tricks.

Zaid and the "double stepover"

Abu Saeed's four-year old son Ali is watching rather forlornly from the sidelines. He wants to play too but he is too young. When the teams stop for a break - the temperature is after all still 45° - I take the ball and try to teach Ali a trick: the so-called 'double stepover,' something German national team midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger does perfectly.

I was taught the trick a few weeks earlier in the English Garden a well-known public park in Munich by my 16-year-old soccer buddy Enis, whose family comes from Turkey. At least in theory I know exactly how to do it: You make a circling movement with your right foot above the ball, out to the right, then the same thing with your left foot - and then you shoot past the opponent.

Ali is fascinated as he watches me. He seems to think I am a great coach. My movements are so slow even a four-year-old can understand. The three older boys - all nephews of Abu Saeed - find it very amusing. One of them asks if he could also demonstrate the trick for Ali. He performs a double stepover about three times faster than I did. Ali looks at me with a quizzical expression. With the help of his father, I try to explain that that was the fast version. Then the boys resume their match. Ali and I watch. He thinks I am OK, perhaps because he can't do the trick any faster than I can.

One of Abu Saeed's nephews plays brilliantly - the one who performed the 'double Schweinsteiger' at triple speed. I ask Abu Saeed who this tall and smart boy is. Abu Saeed answers with a benign smile. "That is Zaid."

Zaid? Zaid, the resistance fighter? I catch my breath for a moment. So this is the young man who could not bring himself to detonate a roadside bomb because an old man was nearby. I am astounded. I never thought an Iraqi resistance fighter would look like that.

At the end of the soccer game there is a penalty shootout - from about half the usual distance. The goal is an old metal bed. Zaid is goalkeeper. Half the balls go astray, Zaid keeps the rest out of his goal with his great reflexes. After each player has had his turn, Zaid calls over to me and says I should try too.

I am very bad at penalty shots. I am also still wearing my ankle-length dishdasha and really do not want to make a fool of myself. But they all want me to have a go, so I put on a brave face. I position the ball, step back two meters and then launch my attack - no doubt an odd sight in my nightgown-like robe. As I kick the ball, I feel the dishdasha rip up to the level of my knee and think to myself I should never have got into this.

But then I notice that the ball is in the goal, right beside the left-hand bedpost. The young boys cheer and laugh and tease the older ones. Zaid is incredulous. He pulls the ball out from between the bedsprings. He wants revenge and challenges me to shoot again. But I decline. One should not push one's luck.

In the meantime, two young boys are directing a flock of bleating sheep into their enclosure on the property next door. The muezzin is calling the faithful to evening prayers. The men - Abu Saeed, Abu Hamid and their nephews, including Zaid - fetch nomad rugs from the house and start to pray together. Abu Saeed leads the prayers. Little Ali stands reverentially next to his father and tries to imitate his every move.

Behind the house the women are cooking two chickens in a homemade wood-fired clay oven. They plucked the birds' feathers during the football match. They can't use the much more modern gas oven standing nearby. A 60cm canister of gas used to cost 12 cents under Saddam Hussein and now costs 20 dollars. Like most people in Ramadi, Abu Saeed cannot afford that. A country with such an abundance of oil cannot provide its own people with fuel. Unbelievable!

The women call the homemade clay oven their "Bush oven". One of the women laughs and calls out sarcastically "Thank you, Mr Bush! We always wanted to know how people cooked in the Middle Ages." Despite the difficult conditions, the women succeed in preparing a delicious soup, two tender chickens, okra and curry, which they place on a tablecloth spread out on the lawn.

As is customary in Iraq, the men and women eat separately. The women are sitting about 10 meters away and appear to be having lots of fun. They seem to be talking about us, as they keep looking in our direction, giggling and whispering.

Two of the four adult women are wearing the abaja, a typical Iraqi black robe that covers the entire body. Two others are wearing bright patterned ankle-

length dresses. They all have their hair covered with a hijab, the traditional headscarf.

The young girls are all wearing European-style clothes. And this evening they have put on their finest. Shala is sporting a trendy jeans skirt and pink T-shirt, her little cousins colourful dungarees or tailored dresses. They have pinned up their hair and tied it with bright ribbons.

After the meal, we drink strong sweet tea in small glasses. The sun is setting. We hear children playing nearby. It seems so peaceful - were it not just three kilometres to one of the biggest U.S. military bases in Iraq, a daily and very visible reminder to the Iraqis that their country is under occupation. Only in Baghdad does the United States have more troops stationed than here in the desert province of Anbar.

Suddenly Apache military helicopters appear and circle above us for several minutes at a height of 50 meters. Abu Saeed looks up sullenly. Above the helicopters we see an American reconnaissance plane, reportedly an F-16, on its routine evening patrol over the Sunni Triangle. Suddenly the sense of peace evaporates. The conversations break off; the women withdraw into the house.

Zaid is sitting opposite me, silently. He is a good-looking boy. He probably knows that, because when he talks to his female cousins, he deploys his charm strategically. But I sense that he is trying to hide something. Whenever he thinks nobody is watching, his eyes look sad and thoughtful. His sunny-boy laugh is that of a young man desperately trying not to lose his mind in this mad war.

I very much want to hear his story. But Zaid does not want to talk. He does not want to endanger his family, he does not want to be sent to Guantánamo on Cuba or to one of the Guantánamos in Iraq. Nor does he want to tell me about what he and his family have gone through. I try for half an hour to persuade him, but I see that he cannot and will not talk.

Abu Saeed, who is listening to our dialog silently, puts his arm around Zaid's shoulder and says to me: "Give him time. He has to think it over. Perhaps tomorrow he will tell you his story. He has to talk to his father first; it is not only about Zaid. And in any case you are going to get to know many other resistance fighters, just like you wanted to."

"I understand, but I don't want a story that has been specially selected for me," I reply. "I want Zaid's story." Abu Saeed smiles. "Be patient. You shall hear his story, insha'Allah."

Zaid wants to go home, and we accompany him to the front gate. Abu Saeed then resumes his favourite activity, talking on the phone. He makes a number

of calls on his big old mobile phone. He evidently talks to Zaid's father, because he mentions his name several times.

First Night in Ramadi

It is pitch black now, and the imam of Al-Jazeera has joined us, a corpulent man with cropped white hair. He lectures me on how much the three monotheist religions have in common and explains that for him as a Muslim, Moses and Jesus are among the greatest prophets.

I am no longer feeling very receptive, and ask him if he has read the Bible. He says he hasn't but can recite the Qur'an from memory, all 114 suras. I congratulate him, and in a dignified manner he stands up in order to proceed to night prayers. The seven men in their white robes bowing in the direction of Mecca are an impressive sight. The imam of Al-Jazeera leads the prayers. The skill with which this bulky man conducts the quite strenuous prayer movements is impressive.

Little Ali, standing with the garden hose in his hand in front of the group of praying men, is impressed. So much so, that he drops the hose, and unintentionally sprays the imam with water from head to toe. But he continues to pray without missing a beat or showing any surprise. The women and girls, however, who had come back out into the garden after the helicopters had left and were sitting nearby on the lawn, can hardly suppress their laughter.

Ali is getting bored as the prayers go on and on. He fetches the airless football and asks me, by imitating the way I had moved my feet, to show him the double stepover again, in front of the group of praying men.

The women can no longer contain themselves and burst out laughing. I put my finger to my lips, to signal to Ali that I can't show him football tricks now while his family are praying and the women are all laughing.

About two hours later, shortly before midnight, Abu Saeed points out the flares being shot into the night sky about two kilometres away. They bathe parts of Ramadi in brilliant light. Helicopters are in the skies looking for targets or people. The nightly reconnaissance mission lasts 20 minutes. No shots are fired. Eventually the sinister firework display comes to an end.

I ask Abu Saeed where I am to sleep. He laughs cheerfully: "Wherever you like." In the "well-heated" reception room or, like the family, outside on the lawn, where it is a "cool 35°." The grid has been down for hours, and the generator has already broken down again.

I trudge into the reception room, but it is so hot there that after 10 minutes I am drenched in sweat. Resignedly, I return to the garden. A row of plastic chairs and cardboard boxes draped with mats separate the men from the women. At some distance from both groups, I lie down on a thin foam mattress under a large date palm.

The last time I slept out of doors was in the 80s with the Mujahideen in the Hindu Kush. I decided then to avoid doing so again. It is a very exhausting way to spend the night. But what the hell, I don't have any choice.

The sky is clear and full of stars. I can't get to sleep, and stare into the sky, asking myself what on earth made me come here. I would so like to be at home sleeping in my comfortable, cozy bed. As it is, I am lying wide-awake in my sweaty dishdasha under a date palm.

Suddenly, at about 2 a.m., just as I am about to fall asleep, I hear the sound of helicopters again and gunfire. I jump up and go over to the garden wall. A gun battle is underway at the spot where the flares had been fired a few hours earlier. Helicopters hover over the area. I hear explosions. It all lasts half an hour, and then it is over.

Abu Saeed has come over and is now quietly standing beside me. I ask him how come there is fighting if there is a ceasefire in Ramadi. Abu Saeed smiles and says he doesn't know. The resistance is made up of many groups and they are hard to control. And perhaps there are still some scattered foreign Al-Qaeda fighters here, he says.

And in any case, the ceasefire only applies to Ramadi itself, and the city has a diameter of just four kilometres. All around the city fighting continues, especially at night. And members of the tribes that cooperate with the Americans during the day fight them at night. You can hire an Iraqi, but you cannot buy him.

But there are battles during the day as well. This afternoon a Humvee was blown up not far from Ramadi, on the road to Baghdad. Several U.S. soldiers were killed, but also some resistance fighters. It is only in the centre of Ramadi that there is no fighting - at least most of the time, says Abu Saeed.

As quietly as he had come over to talk to me, he goes back to his bivouac. And I lie down on my thin mattress and, at last, fall into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Zaid's Dreams

A little after six in the morning, two American Apache helicopters wake me as they thunder over the house. It is light already. The children are all

bundled up in blankets on their foam mattresses. Abu Hamid shoos them out of their beds. At six o'clock, it is time to get up in Ramadi.

I try to ignore the commotion, I just want to carry on sleeping peacefully. But I don't stand a chance. Two helicopters fly low over the house. What a merciless wake-up service! I stumble sleepily to the communal shower. I stand for several minutes under the stream of water, which is still warm.

Abu Saeed sees how tired I still am and brings me large mug of black coffee. Slowly, my spirits rise. He also brings me homemade pita and jam. I munch away appreciatively. Then I try to shave looking into a clouded mirror without destroying my moustache. I am glad the mirror only yields a vague impression of my face. Few people look good after long journeys and short nights.

I find a shady corner of the garden and start to write some notes. Suddenly somebody taps me on the shoulder from behind. I turn round and find myself looking at Zaid's face. "You wanted to talk to me," he says quietly and a little shyly.

Zaid is wearing blue jeans, a washed-out red T-shirt and imitation Adidas trainers. In his left hand he is holding and hiding, rather like a schoolboy, a packet of Gauloises made in Syria. When Al-Qaeda were on the rampage in Ramadi, smoking was prohibited and even dangerous.

Zaid set off at six o'clock from his home in the Al-Sufia neighbourhood. To get to Al-Jazeera used to take 15 minutes, now it takes two-and-a-half hours, because of all the roadblocks and checkpoints. Zaid has talked to his father. And the father has given him permission to tell me his story. Slowly and quietly, Zaid begins to do just that.

He was born in 1986 during the Iraq-Iran war. His father Mohammed and his mother Amira own a small grocery store in Al-Sufia. They managed to get by under very difficult conditions during the war and then during the regime of the sanctions imposed on Iraq. They always had food, even if it was sometimes only bread.

Times got much harder after the Gulf War following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Iraq lost the war in 1991 to a multinational force led by the United States. The economic sanctions made life very difficult. Zaid's parents could rarely find vegetables or meat for their family of seven.

Zaid recalls that his parents suffered much more than their three sons and two daughters. Whenever they found something good to eat, they gave it to their children. They had to work twice as hard to meet their family's needs. Zaid says a number of young children in the neighbourhood died of malnutrition and poor medical care, because the health service in Iraq

collapsed as a result of the sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council.

He has few positive memories of this period. He and his friends spent all their free time playing soccer on a makeshift pitch. Barefoot, of course. He often came home with bleeding toes.

Whenever his father got angry, because Zaid had once again not done his homework, he hid behind his mother. She always protected him. And whenever he got into trouble at school for his pranks - which Zaid recounts with merriment - his mother always stood up for him against his strict father, no matter what he had done. And he did plenty.

Once his class had an English exam. He had written some English words on his notebook, which was lying on the desk beside him. Zaid protested that the words had nothing to do with the test, but his teacher was convinced Zaid was trying to cheat and sent him out of the room.

Zaid was very angry, but above all bored, hanging around alone in the schoolyard. Then he had what he considered a brilliant idea. He went back into the classroom and told the teacher he was not the only one who had cheated, seven of his friends had also done so. And he pointed to the seven best soccer players in the class, with whom he used to play after school.

The seven were furious as they were sent out, and threatened to beat Zaid up. But he said he had only named them so that they could go and play some football. He had been so bored without them. His friends laughed, and they made peace. While the others were sweating over the English test inside, Zaid and his friends went off to enjoy a game of soccer.

Another time, at the end-of-year party, Zaid presented the math instructor with a can of Pepsi on behalf of the class, because they had chosen him as their favourite teacher. Flattered, he accepted the honour and the cool drink.

He had not noticed that Zaid had shaken the can vigorously. The teacher pulled the tab and was promptly sprayed by the sticky brown liquid all over his face and suit.

The kids were delighted, the teacher less so. Of course, trouble was waiting at home. But as always, his mother shielded Zaid from his furious father.

His mother is a great cook, Zaid tells me. Whenever there was trouble, she would make one of his favourite dishes - kebabs, or dolma, stuffed tomatoes or stuffed paprika. Zaid smiles happily when he talks about his mother.

On September 11, 2001, when Al-Qaeda terrorists fly two airplanes into the World Trade Center, Zaid is a boy of 15. A few weeks later, the first

speculation over a connection between Iraq and Al-Qaeda are aired on television. There are discussions about the possibility of the United States waging war not only against Afghanistan, but also against Iraq.

Zaid thinks that is rubbish. He does not know anybody in his small world who even knows what Al-Qaeda is.

He thinks it is absurd propaganda by the United States to claim that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction, given the economic sanctions and years of United Nations inspections. How could Iraq have produced weapons of mass destruction? In 2001 it was "the most closely observed country in the world," Zaid says. How could one believe anything so stupid? Even in the West no one really believes that. People can't be that stupid or malicious. That could never be a reason to go to war! There must be some justice in the world, even for Iraq.

When the war does indeed start, in March 2003, Zaid is sure Iraq will win. He believes Saddam Hussein, who has often said the United States doesn't stand a chance against Iraq. Zaid attends the daily prayers at which the people of Ramadi ask for God's help in these days of hardship. He sits with his friends in front of the television for hour upon hour, watching the news about the war.

When a big sandstorm halts the Americans' advance for a few days, Zaid thinks the tide has turned. At least God is on the side of the Iraqis. And when the information minister, Mohammad Said al-Sahhaf, says: "Bush, Blair and Rumsfeld. They are the funny trio" and "God will roast their stomachs in hell at the hands of Iraqis," Zaid believes every word.

Even with American tanks in the centre of Baghdad, Al-Sahhaf still declares grandly, before the world's journalists, "I give you a threefold guarantee, there are no American soldiers in Baghdad; ... they are retreating on all fronts; ... their soldiers are committing suicide by the hundreds on the gates of Baghdad." Zaid says now he knows that people in the West laughed themselves silly listening to Al-Sahhaf, but in Iraq people were clinging desperately to his words; what he said was their last hope. But eventually defeat could not be concealed any longer, and for Zaid, who was now 17, the world fell apart.

American tanks first appear in Ramadi at the end of April 2003. They are met with a hail of sandals, stones and vegetables. Nobody is afraid of them, but nobody cheers or welcomes the Americans either.

The occupation of Ramadi proceeded in stages: US troops first secured the major crossroads, then the most important buildings, then they closed some roads, and finally they divided up the city into various zones cut off from each other.

The Iraqi troops simply went home, Zaid continues, and hid their uniforms. All the members of the armed forces and security services were dismissed by the Americans and became unemployed overnight. Many joined the resistance, bringing with them their experience and their weapons. Others fled the country.

Life for the people of Ramadi became harder by the day. American planes bombed alleged pockets of resistance and killed entire families in the process. American snipers posted on roofs across the city shot at anything they thought was suspicious. They usually hit innocent people. Most resistance fighters know how to elude snipers, Zaid tells me.

In June 2004, Zaid gets his high school diploma, with pretty good grades. He is now 18. His plan is to study history at Ramadi's Anbar University, like his uncle Abu Saeed did, starting in the fall and then to become a teacher. Zaid knows all the tricks mischievous youngsters get up to, because he used to be one himself. His students won't be able to fool him; he wants to educate young people to become capable, confident citizens and show them that life is worth living. He is really looking forward to his future career.

That is why he has not taken an active role in the resistance, Zaid says. He is not really interested in military matters, but in history. And he did not want to endanger his family. His two brothers Haroun and Karim felt the same way. There is no military tradition in their family.

And then in June 2006, fate catches up with his small family. Zaid runs his left hand over his eyes to conceal his emotions. With his right hand, he helplessly begins to hit the grass.

Abu Saeed, who has joined us silently, puts his arm around Zaid's shoulders. "We have to go," he says, "The doctor has an appointment. You can carry on tomorrow." It is one in the afternoon, and at 48° it is a little cooler than the day before. We walk slowly to our Chevrolet, which is by now covered by dust. Zaid comes with us.

We drive along bumpy streets through the city of palms, past countless checkpoints, towards Al-Sufia. We go past Zaid's house, drive around one block twice, then suddenly turn back the way we had come, as if Musa, our driver, wants to shake off somebody who was tailing us. That is probably what he is in fact doing.

Then we stop in front of a dilapidated house. A gate opens. We turn quickly into the courtyard. Abu Saeed carefully closes the gate. A group of five men are sitting next to the house; they look at us with interest as we vanish indoors.

We are in a spartan room with three old chairs and a low wooden table. It is so gloomy, I find it hard to see. Abu Saeed says he had promised to introduce me to active resistance fighters. He is a man of his word. The men outside are fighters from various resistance groups, and they are willing to tell me their stories. But I should not ask their names or take any photographs. Apart from that, I can ask whatever I want.

I am astonished. It was so hard to get Zaid to talk - and here Abu Saeed has drummed up a whole bunch of resistance fighters! I accept his conditions. Abu Saeed goes to the door and gestures to the men. He sits down next to me, and is going to be my interpreter.

Omar

The first to join us at the wobbly table is Omar, a friendly, brawny 36-year-old Iraqi from Mosul. His handshake is so painfully firm I vow just to say goodbye when he leaves. Omar is wearing a blue striped T-shirt and jeans. He looks like a young Bud Spencer, the star of so many Spaghetti Westerns. Except Omar looks much friendlier.

Omar has been fighting in the Iraqi resistance since the very beginning. He lost 10 members of his family, including his oldest son Mazin, when the American troops invaded. Mazin was nine years old when American soldiers shot him, Omar tells me.

He will never forget the look on the face of his dying son; his eyes were pleading: "Papa, help me. You always help me." But Omar could not help this time, and Mazin bled to death in his arms. Even some of the American soldiers were devastated as they watched Mazin die.

Omar's expression, so open and friendly a moment ago, is transformed. He lowers his head and tries to maintain his composure. After a while he says I should not ask him any more about his son. The memories are too painful.

When Omar joined the resistance, he received "comprehensive training" from former Iraqi army officers. Now he leads a group of 250 resistance fighters based in Kirkuk and Tikrit.

His father and one of his brothers have been in prison for one-and-a-half years, he says. But he does not know where. Families are rarely told. The Americans also detained him, Omar tells me. But after three months and 10 days he managed to escape.

In prison - he won't tell me which one - he was well treated by the American soldiers, even though he told them during interrogation that he was a resistance fighter. He was not tortured, and a doctor even treated his

toothache. He was lucky, Omar says, in the midst of such misfortune.

He respects the soldiers who interrogated him, because they were humane, Omar says, even though he knows how bad things are in most prison camps. But he will never accept the Americans as occupiers of his country. Some of the American troops had even admitted that they were against the occupation of Iraq. They know they have no right to be here, says Omar.

His family lives on a farm, but Omar has not been to see them for a long time, because there are so many informers around, who cooperate with the occupiers. His mother died a year ago, but he could not attend her funeral, because he would have been arrested at once. They did not let his father attend his wife's funeral.

Omar is a devout Muslim and a Ba'athist nationalist, he says. After the chaos and the bloodshed caused by the invasion, the popularity of the Ba'athists increased. In particular, the way Saddam Hussein behaved at his execution gave the Ba'athists a boost.

Omar says he is proud that Saddam Hussein met his death with such dignity. Bush made a hero of Saddam.

I stand up to say goodbye to Omar. He looks at me thoughtfully and says very earnestly that the resistance never attacks journalists. I tell him that I am not a journalist but a media executive. He laughs and says that doesn't make any difference. He still considers me a guest in his country. Though, he adds, he is disappointed by the coverage of Iraq in the Western media.

He is astonished that no distinction is drawn between the Iraqi resistance to the occupation and the terrorism brought in from abroad that is directed against the civilian population.

He also finds it strange that the resistance is criticized for hiding in residential neighbourhoods among civilians. Where should they be? The resistance doesn't have any barracks. Resistance fighters are freedom fighters. During the day, many have to go to work. Moreover, in most places the people all support the resistance.

Omar gets up and grasps my hand again with his vice-like enormous right hand, despite my vow not to make the same mistake again. Omar sees me wince and then shakes my right hand. He laughs and apologizes, saying next time he will just give me a hug. He adds that he hopes my country will never suffer as much misfortune as his; then he turns and strides out to the garden, to rejoin his comrades-in-arms.

Mohammed

My hand still hurts, as another man enters the room. He is of medium height and looks fatherly and elderly. In fact he is 42 years old and therefore 25 years younger than me. He is wearing a pair of grey pressed trousers and a short-sleeved brown shirt. He looks very dignified.

He introduces himself as Mohammed - which is probably not his real name. None of the men at this meeting wants to tell me his name, for security reasons. I look at his large hand and decide not to shake it. I put my right hand to my heart and bow - a greeting that has been customary in the Arab world for centuries.

Mohammed used to be a professor at Baghdad University. He is a Shi'ite. As a member of the Ba'athist party he joined the resistance a few weeks after the American invasion.

Now he heads a "united resistance group" made up of nationalists, Ba'athists and moderate Islamists. He is evidently a leading figure in the Iraqi resistance. He is not only very erudite, but also astoundingly well informed about politics.

He tells me that he joined the resistance "in order to end the humiliation of the Iraqi people." During their nightly raids, the occupiers so often attack families in their homes and humiliate them. They regularly take away all the men, and sometimes even the women, old people and children, and lock them up in camps for months for no apparent reason.

Recently in Mosul, they arrested a frail man of over 70 because his son was said to belong to the resistance. The soldiers tied him up and left him lying on the stone floor for five days. Sitting comfortably in an armchair, they would take it in turns to rest their boots on his neck or face for hours to make him reveal where his son was. But the old man did not say a word.

And Mohammed's own brother, who is 50 and has a serious heart condition, was held without any medical care for weeks in a tiny cell in order to force him to reveal Mohammed's whereabouts.

Although he has never been to America, Mohammed considers the United States to be a great country. He is fighting U.S. troops because they are occupiers, not because they are Americans. He simply cannot fathom the stupidity of this war and of American politics. The U.S. army doesn't stand a chance in Iraq. The resistance has long since attained military parity, if not more, and one day they will force the United States to pull out its forces.

Mohammed estimates that there are more than 100,000 active fighters in the resistance, and between 40 and 50 percent of them are independent

nationalists or Ba'athists. The moderate Islamists make up the other half. Most of the leaders are Ba'athists and former army officers, because they have the most military experience.

There are many reasons why the Ba'athists cooperate with the moderate Islamists, Mohammed explains. One is that they have almost no financial resources, while the moderate Islamists receive private donations from the Gulf States.

About five percent of the insurgents nationwide belong to Al-Qaeda. Most of the leadership and the hard core of their fighters are foreigners. They have the most money. Al-Qaeda can even afford to buy photographs and videos of attacks on the occupiers from Iraqi resistance groups, and then claim its own fighters carried out those operations.

Mohammed tells me one has to distinguish between the extremist wing of Al-Qaeda, made up mainly of foreigners, and moderate fellow travellers, most of whom are Iraqis. They are often well paid and need the money to look after their families. He knows that the West rejects this distinction, but that is the way things are; there is a limited degree of cooperation with the moderate wing in certain military operations against the occupation forces.

Efforts are underway to bring together the various resistance groups, including Shi'ites and Sunnis, in a national liberation front, with the aim of freeing the country and forging peace - even by making deals with the United States.

Al-Qaeda, however, would definitely not be welcome in such a front. The extremists in Al-Qaeda are pursuing other goals. They are not interested in bringing peace to Iraq, they want the war with the Americans to continue for as long as possible - and not only in Iraq. What is more, Al-Qaeda only fights for the Sunnis, and that is not the Iraqi way: The multi-confessional Iraqi resistance fights for everybody.

Just as bad as Al-Qaeda are the militias run by radical Shi'ite politicians - especially the death squads of the Shi'ite Mahdi Army. Many of these militias are funded by Iran. But the militias loyal to some Sunni politicians are also abhorrent, Mohammed tells me. And the private security contractors financed by the United States are no better.²⁶ These "outsourced" parts of the American armed forces are comprised of more than 100,000 highly paid people, and have enjoyed immunity ever since the invasion in 2003 thanks to a decree by Paul Bremer, who was then head of the American-run civil administration.

The Blackwater Army in particular, the best-known American private mercenary army in Iraq, is notorious for its ruthlessness and brutality. The so-called "security" contractors employ not only U.S. mercenaries but also ones

from Latin America, Africa and Asia to fulfil a variety of functions. They are responsible for protecting politicians and diplomats, for securing important deliveries in exchange for large sums of money, or guarding strategically important buildings and prisons. In Fallujah they have even taken part in military action.

Sometimes the American secret services use the private security contractors for special operations. The hired help do the dirty work, things with which U.S. officials do not want to be associated. If a mercenary is injured or killed, there is no public announcement. That is all set out in their contracts.

Al-Qaeda, the Mahdi Army and the secret services of certain foreign powers are responsible for the abhorrent attacks on markets and mosques. Their aim is to discredit the Iraqi resistance, both at home and internationally, and to undermine the resolve and cohesion of the Iraqi people. The legitimate Iraqi resistance has nothing to do with such disgusting terrorism. True Iraqis do not kill innocent civilians.

One major cause of the current political problems within Iraq, says Mohammed, is that after the invasion, the United States distributed power on the basis of religious denomination. They thereby intentionally created the conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ites, which had never existed in this form, in order to divide the country.

It is as though after the Second World War, government positions and seats in parliament in Germany had been distributed on the basis of membership in the Catholic and Protestant churches.

At first, here in Iraq, people were hired even for ordinary jobs not because of their qualifications but their religious denomination or ethnic background. That was a source of great tension.

It was ultimately the same old strategy of "divide and rule" that the United States used throughout the Arab world to impede pan-Arabic nationalism. The United States made a conscious decision to ignore the fact that Iraq had already coalesced into a nation, with special features in the Kurdish north. Multi-ethnic and multi-confessional centres had long since emerged in Baghdad, Mosul and Basra.

Shi'ites and Sunnis lived together in harmony for centuries, Mohammed continues. The differences between the two branches of Islam are less important than those between Catholicism and Protestantism. In villages with only one mosque, for example, Sunnis and Shi'ites usually prayed together. What they have in common will soon become evident again, once the Americans withdraw.

To claim that a horrible civil war will erupt in Iraq if the United States pulls its troops out is an old trick. In 1920, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George also warned of a civil war if Britain withdrew its army. In response to that, the Iraqi tribes joined forces and rose up against the British colonial rulers.

Mohammed is very much the professor as he lectures me. The language of the conquerors is always the same: When the British marched into Baghdad in 1917, they announced they had not come as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators - rather like the United States in 2003. But they stayed for four decades. It is always the same story.

The Iraqi resistance conducts more than 1,000 military operations each week, currently about 180 per day. These figures were confirmed by the Baker-Hamilton report, which was written by senior U.S. experts. The nationalist and Ba'athist resistance is responsible for about 50 per cent of these operations.

The resistance has weapons from the old Iraqi army but also gratefully accepted modern American weapons, which the United States handed out generously and without much supervision after the invasion, and, of course, Iranian weapons. But they have to be bought at high prices on the black market, unlike the American weapons, most of which were free.

The Western media pay hardly any attention to the resistance's military activities. What is even worse, however, is that they almost completely ignore the daily acts of violence, the bombings and the raids committed by the U.S. troops. As a rule they only report the two or three suicide bombings that occur each day, which are usually perpetrated by foreigners, and then claim they exemplify the violence that prevails within Iraq. The media thus play along with American war propaganda, whether intentionally or not.

"You only show on television terrorist suicide attacks organized from abroad, you never show the terrorism of the occupiers," Mohammed says quietly. All Arabic-language broadcasters that report fairly on the brutality of the U.S. army and on the successes of the Iraqi resistance to the U.S. occupation come under massive pressure from the United States. The satellite television station Al Zawraa, for example, has been closed down in Cairo and in Baghdad because of its critical reporting on the United States.

Since the first battle for Fallujah, most resistance groups have CDs with satellite photographs of Iraq's major highways and important buildings, which are very useful for planning their attacks, even if they are not always up-to-date. In the digital age, laptop computers and Google Earth are part of a freedom fighter's equipment.

Mohammed says that the resistance is prepared to talk with the United States about ending the occupation - and about interim face-saving measures. The negotiations must lead to the restoration of Iraqi sovereignty under a truly Iraqi government, to the release of the many thousands of prisoners of war, and, of course, to reparations for the damage caused. After all, Iraq was condemned by the United Nations to pay billions in reparations after it invaded Kuwait. The same must apply to the United States as well.

The resistance is not fighting to establish an Islamic theocratic state - unlike both Al-Qaeda, which is financed by Saudi "charitable organizations," and the radical Shi'ite militias, which are mostly funded by Iran. The resistance wants to install a secular constitution, Mohammed tells me. It wants to create a democratic state, in which all Iraqis feel represented, a state that is nationalist in orientation and, if the Ba'athists have their way, pan-Arabic as well. It will, of course, have its spiritual and intellectual roots in Islam.

Mohammed has the air of a benign scholar. It is hard to imagine him conducting military operations, deciding where to position a roadside bomb, or leading his men into battle. I have the impression that he would rather be back with his students at Baghdad University than take part in this dirty war, with all its boundless human tragedies.

For Mohammed, terrorists are people who kill civilians for political reasons. He therefore considers Al-Qaeda, the death squads run by certain politicians, and the U.S. government all to be terrorists. The soldiers of the U.S. government have demonstrably killed hundreds of thousands of civilians in Iraq, more than Al-Qaeda and all the militias together. "It is against this terrorism that we are fighting," says Mohammed, who then adds that it is a strange phenomenon that a U.S. administration that oversees the murder of civilians every day, calls the Iraqi resistance a terrorist organization, even though it does not kill civilians.

Mohammed makes clear that he is not calling the young American soldiers in Iraq terrorists. They too are victims of this war - even though as a resistance leader he has a duty to fight them. The U.S. president is robbing not only the young of Iraq of their youth, but the young American soldiers as well. Almost 4,000 American soldiers have been killed and more than 30,000 have been severely wounded; but in the United States no one talks about the wounded American soldiers, let alone the wounded Iraqis.

Mohammed has spoken with great seriousness. He is the kind of man one would like to hug when saying goodbye, in times of peace, that is - even if one does not share all his opinions. But Iraq is at war. So we bow and wish other well - Salam alaikum, peace be with you!

Ahmad

The heat in the room has become almost unbearable. But suddenly the power returns, and with a groan the air conditioning starts up again and slowly cools the air. Still, it is at least 40° in here.

I am looking at my notes and trying to put my thoughts in order when the next man I am to talk to enters. Standing in front of me, he asks almost shyly if he may take a seat. His name is Ahmad and he is from Ramadi. He is tall and thin and sports a carefully trimmed goatee beard, and is wearing a grey kaftan. He is 30 years old, single, and used to be a construction worker.

Ahmad too wipes the sweat from his brow. While I drink water, he stills his thirst with hot sweet tea. Ahmad is very pale, unusually shy, and not very talkative. He tells his story haltingly and in a quiet voice.

At about noon on a sunny day in the fall of 2006, he was strolling in the almost deserted streets of Ramadi. He was on his way to do some shopping. He was walking slowly because it was very hot. He had a day off work and was in no rush. As he turned into Ishrin Street in the centre of town, he did not notice how the American marksmen lying on the roofs of the buildings focussed their guns on him. He does not know why they shot at him. He had nothing to do with the resistance. He was just thankful for every day he stayed out of trouble and continued to have work. He did not earn much, but he could still help his family to get by.

The marksmen aimed at his crotch and fired; they destroyed his testicles and severely damaged his penis. The doctors in Ramadi patched him up as best they could, but there was not much they could save. He spent weeks in the hospital and is still receiving treatment, because the wounds are not healing.

Ahmad say he knew there were American sharpshooters in Ramadi but did not think they would shoot at ordinary people walking down the street. You never know in advance where the marksmen will take up position. It is a matter of chance. Sometimes they burst into homes and take children hostage. They lock the rest of the family into a room, so they cannot tell anyone what is taking place.

Ahmad still does not know what military aim these marksmen serve. It is rumoured that they bet on who hits the most bull's-eyes in any one day. Since they shot him, he has supported the resistance as best he can.

Ahmad has shown no emotion during our conversation, and spoken very quietly. Then he stops talking. He had told me enough. He gets up shyly and says goodbye. He goes back to the other resistance fighters, who are still sitting in the garden.

Yussuf

The air conditioning has broken down again. The sweating can resume. I very much need a break; my mental faculties are waning, despite the huge amounts of water I have been drinking. As I am about to tell Abu Saeed, Yussuf suddenly appears in front of me. He is wearing a white dishdasha and a traditional white Arab headdress, held in place with a thick black cord.

At last, an Arab resistance fighter who looks just like the Western stereotype of an Arab Muslim! But to my great surprise, I am proven wrong: Yussuf is not a Muslim but a Christian resistance fighter. He is 35 years old, big, and tall.

He is almost always smiling as we talk. I ask why he seems to be in such a good mood. It is because he is a trader, he tells me, it is a good idea to smile in a friendly manner. His slender fingers are playing with a string of black beads; it is not a rosary, but a subhah, Arab prayer beads.

Yussuf is just one of many Christian resistance fighters in Iraq.²⁸ He comes from the Al-Dourah neighbourhood of south Baghdad. More than 100,000 Christians used to live there together with 250,000 Muslims. More than half the Christians fled to escape the war and the terrorists. Most went to Syria, which is well known for its friendliness towards Christians. Of the Christians who stayed, most support the resistance, Yussuf tells me with a smile.

He has never been a member of the Ba'ath party. He is not interested in politics. And he never liked Saddam Hussein. But he could not just stand by and watch his country be destroyed by foreign troops. Three of his cousins, also Christians, were killed by the Americans.

One day, American soldiers stormed his house at four o'clock in the morning, kicked in all the doors, shot at his car, which then went up in flames, and arrested his nephews and threw them in jail.

The Christians he knows see themselves above all as Iraqis, Yussuf tells me. And for him, it was an obvious choice to fight in the Iraqi resistance. He considers Bush to be no more of a true Christian than Bin Laden a true Muslim. Real Christians and Muslims do not kill defenseless civilians.

The overwhelming majority of attacks ascribed to Sunni or Shi'ite militias are in fact carried out by foreigners, "imported terrorists," as Yussuf calls them; but occasionally Iraqis are also involved in attacks on civilians. There is no denying it. But at a certain point people who have been robbed of all hope are capable of anything. Sometimes they find no way out of the vicious circle of violence. That is true, not just of Iraqis, but of all peoples.

Yussuf then cites a passage from the Bible - here in the middle of Iraq - about the siege of Samaria, which was then the capital of the kingdom of Israel: The famine was so great, that a handful of dove's dung was sold for five silver shekels; and in the end their desperation was so great that some people killed their own sons, cooked and ate them.

"Book of Kings," Yussuf says soberly. There are more passages in the Old Testament about the cannibalism of desperate people, who kill and eat their relatives.

The predicament of his own people is not so different from that of the inhabitants of Samaria in the Kingdom of Israel thousands of years ago. You Westerners, Yussuf tells me, should study your own history before pronouncing judgment over others.

He falls silent. Then he resumes: There are considerably more Christian resistance fighters in Iraq than Al-Qaeda terrorists. There is no difference between the Christian resistance fighters and their moderate Muslim comrades-in-arms. Christians and Muslims in Iraq belong together and fight together. Nobody in the Iraqi resistance cares whether a fighter is Muslim or Christian.

The Christians of Iraq were one of the first Christian communities in the Orient. Before the American invasion they were much freer than they are today. Even mixed marriages between Muslims and Christians were considered quite normal. But now all that has become impossible.

Christian women now have to wear a veil, because the invasion has allowed Sunni and Shi'ite extremists to surface. The West cannot even imagine what a disaster the United States has created in the once secular state of Iraq - for its Christians as well.

"Because most of the American occupation troops are Christian," Yussuf continues, "Al-Qaeda sees Iraq's own Christians as occupiers too. They persecute us. Fortunately, our people often find shelter in the homes of Muslim friends. And Christian families often hide Muslims who are being chased by occupation troops." I look at Yussuf in surprise; he laughs and says it is entirely normal and obvious that they would help each other.

Before the invasion, 1.5 million Christians lived in Iraq. Many were senior figures in the cabinet or the diplomatic service; they were generals, hotel proprietors, or successful businessmen. The former Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz is a practicing Christian.

Now there are only 600,000 Christians here, and their situation is "really lousy." Under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein things were a lot better for the Christians than they are under the "military dictatorship" of George Bush.

The U.S. president has launched a very strange kind of "crusade." He is just as much of a terrorist as were the Crusaders of the Middle Ages. That has nothing to do with true Christianity.

Just as the Christians of Iraq fight the "terrorism" of the "Christian" occupiers from the United States, so do the Manichaeans, Sabian Mandeans and Yezidis. Women also fight in the resistance. And there is a growing non-violent political resistance movement among important social groups such as the labour unions, especially the important oil-workers union.

Christians in the resistance are mainly active in Baghdad and Mosul. Christian resistance fighters also sharply condemn suicide and other terrorist attacks in civilians. Terrorism is un-Iraqi, un-Islamic and un-Christian.

Truly free elections can only be held after the Americans pull out. The elections held so far have all been rigged, Yussuf tells me. For the elections in 2004, the names of the candidates were not even disclosed, allegedly for "security reasons." There were only secret lists. The people had no choice but to vote on religious or ethnic lines.

Truckloads of fraudulently completed ballot papers were brought to Baghdad from Iran. It is incredible that nobody in the West expressed surprise that it took two months before the election results were declared.

"How is it possible that you accept such an election, while in Palestine you have them vote as many times as it takes to get the result and the government you want?" asks Yussuf.

He says Saddam Hussein was too harsh a dictator. But the American military dictatorship since the invasion has been much harsher, bloodier and more brutal. "If that is democracy, then you can keep it. Nobody in Iraq could ever have imagined that in the name of democracy the West would torture, rape, mutilate and kill hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians."

And in any case, a democracy in which the people are bamboozled about important issues is not a true democracy.

How can a state claim to uphold the rule of law and at the same time willfully break international law? That is fraud!

It makes me sick, Yussuf declares, to think that the U.S. president claims, as a born-again Christian, to be acting in the name of God. I too, he says, am a Christian.

Yussuf stands up to leave: "Tell your people in Germany that it is not only Muslims who are fighting the United States in Iraq, but Christians as well. We want to be free, free of Western occupation forces and free of Western

terrorism. That holds for us Christians as well." He bows and departs with a brief smile, leaving me feeling thoughtful and perturbed.

Rami

I am exhausted, and so is Abu Saeed, despite the countless glasses of tea he has drunk. It is much too hot in this room. Abu Saeed sees that I have heard and seen enough for one day and that I am completely worn out. Still, he says there is one more resistance fighter I have to meet today.

Before I can respond, he is at the door, beckoning to someone to come in. Rami enters and sits down opposite me. He is a slender young man of 27, with short hair and a smart chin beard.

Rami's face is grey, his expression bitter. By day he studies history at the University of Baghdad. By night he is a resistance fighter. I ask him why he is in the resistance, and his expression becomes even more bitter. In a quiet voice he starts to tell me his story.

A few months after the American invasion, U.S. soldiers stormed his family's house. They called it a "cleansing operation." They smashed everything that crossed their path. They were looking for him, Rami tells me, because somebody had told them that he was working for the resistance. But at that time he had nothing at all to do with it. The soldiers could not find him, so they started pulling apart the closets and turning the whole house upside down.

His mother was crying and threw herself at the feet of the soldiers, pleading with them not to destroy her family's few possessions. One of the soldiers took a step back and shot her dead.

Rami purses his lips and falls silent. When he has regained his composure, he struggles for words as he tells me that is what the occupation troops often do. If they don't find the person they are looking for, they shoot a member of his family or put his relatives in prison.

If I don't believe him, Rami says, I should read the story of Abeer, the girl from Mahmudiyah who was raped and then killed along with her family by members of a U.S. military unit. That is just one example of the brutality of the occupation troops. Rami stops talking and remains silent for several minutes.

Then, haltingly, he resumes. Such things are usually hushed up. The perpetrators are only prosecuted if some courageous journalist brings an atrocity to the public's attention. Rami says he doubts he will ever smile again. The American soldiers have shot the smile out of his heart and his face.

Then he utters a sentence I never wanted to be confronted with in Iraq. Just thinking about it as I prepared for this journey sent shivers down my spine. And now Rami says to me: "And that is why I fight for Al-Qaeda."

I look at Abu Saeed in fury and tell him he knew full well that I wanted to have nothing to do with Al-Qaeda. Abu Saeed looks back at me with an innocent expression and reminds me that I had said I wanted to meet a representative cross-section of all the groups fighting in Iraq, and that is what he is providing me with. Except for the Shi'ite militias. He can't help me there.

Al-Qaeda is, unfortunately, part of the post-war reality in Iraq, he continues. One that has been imported by the United States. "You wanted to see what the invasion has done to Iraq.

That is why I have introduced you to an Al-Qaeda fighter. The presence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq is one of the consequences of the American invasion. Under Saddam Hussein every religious extremist was persecuted - perhaps, in your view, too mercilessly. But under Saddam, Al-Qaeda would not have stood a chance in Iraq."

Rami has not understood what we were saying, but he has guessed that we were talking about him and about Al-Qaeda. I do not know what to do. I had wanted to avoid this situation for many reasons, including concern for my own personal safety. But now I am in that situation, and cannot pretend this conversation is not happening.

We are all on our feet, but now I sit down again and gesture to Rami to do the same. I ask him why on earth he would be so crazy as to join such a gang of murderers, who have killed thousands of civilians and brought dishonour and disrespect upon Islam. Rami looks at me calmly and asks: "What would you have done if your mother had been killed in front of her family?"

I say I do not know, but that I surely would not have joined a terrorist organization. Rami answers quietly that he had had three options: to join either the anti-colonialist 1920 Revolutionary Brigades or the Ba'athists or Al-Qaeda. His father and brother chose the Ba'athists; he chose Al-Qaeda.

He received military training from an old army officer. In his own home the officer taught Rami and two friends the basics about bombs with timed detonators, ground-to-ground missiles, remote-controlled explosive devices - things he had known nothing about before.

Rami says he is fighting for an Islamic Iraq with a constitution based on the Qur'an and with respect for the sharia. But if the Ba'athists or other resistance groups were to win elections, he would respect any government they formed.

Rami notices that I am still looking angry and says he belongs to the moderate wing of Al-Qaeda, like most Iraqi members and fighters. He says he has never killed a civilian and will never do so. But the United States must stop tormenting and abusing his country.

Germany too is now playing a tragic part - especially in Afghanistan - even though it took such a clear stand on the Iraq war. Rami asks me whether I had ever considered the fact that NATO, with German support, had killed more civilians in Afghanistan than the Taliban had done.

I reply that even if this well-known propaganda claim by Al-Qaeda were true, which is something I cannot judge, that would still be no reason to join a terrorist organization like Al-Qaeda. Our discussion becomes more heated. Rami says again that moderate members of Al-Qaeda really do exist. These members, including himself, reject violence against civilians. Violence against civilians, even against "decent Iraqi police officers," is not acceptable even if at the same time American soldiers are killed.

Why then, I ask him, did he join Al-Qaeda? That means at the very least being an accessory to terrorism. Rami does not give me a straight answer. He says he repeatedly objected to the radical, foreign wing of Al-Qaeda, but neither he nor his friends had any influence. His opinion was respected, but not accepted.

He knows that the extremists take hostages, kill civilians and have an extremely narrow view of the world. He does not accept that but he still supports Al-Qaeda because it is most active in fighting the occupiers.

I ask him what he thinks of Al-Zarqawi and Bin Laden. Rami again astonishes me with the inconsistency of his arguments. He says he admires both men. He would have liked to work with Al-Zarqawi because he inflicted heavy losses on U.S. forces. Rami says he is impressed by Bin Laden's courage in standing up to the United States.

We have reached a point at which I feel it makes no sense to continue talking. It is hopeless, talking to followers of Al-Zarqawi and Bin Laden. I stand up to indicate the meeting is over. Rami also rises.

His argumentation is entirely irrational. And he knows it. He rejects violence against civilians and admires terrorists who mercilessly murder innocent civilians. Rami sees that I do not want to ask him any more questions. But still he tries again to justify his position.

Rami tells me that he used to be a quiet and peaceable student. But then he experienced the daily humiliation of his people; he saw the images from Abu Ghraib on television and the Internet. After the death of his mother he could not sleep or eat for days.

Although he had never been a supporter of the Ba'athist Party, he cried when he saw Saddam Hussein's execution on television. Saddam was not a good ruler, but under him there was security and peace. The chaos in Iraq shows that the country needs a strong leader. Rami asks me whether occupation by the Americans and chaos are really better than Saddam Hussein's dictatorship.

I say neither the one nor the other is right. But Rami just keeps on talking. He was never a particularly devout Muslim, he says, but the invasion by the Americans and the atrocities they commit, which are a thousand times worse than those blamed on Al-Qaeda, have turned him into a patriot and a Muslim. In fact, many Iraqis only became patriotic and religious in response to the occupation.

Bush is responsible for the deaths of many more people than all the dictators and terrorists in the world put together. Nonetheless, every Western politician is proud to have a meeting with Bush. Rami snarls in anger: "Your politicians count the minutes they are allowed to spend with the American president, and nobody holds him to account for the death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis."

He knows that he is on the U.S. forces' wanted list, but he does not care. He is not afraid to die. Why should he fare better than his mother or his friends or the many other Iraqis who have lost their lives over the past four years? He will never forget the suffering that the Americans have inflicted on his family and his friends. Never, ever!

At this point, I knew I should definitely bring our conversation to an end, but I find Rami interesting - this sad, bitter, helpless, ashen-faced man, who looks nothing like the stereotype of a terrorist. So I let him continue telling me his story.

Like most of his fellow fighters he has also been in prison. He says he was well treated "physically." But "psychologically" he was humiliated. They locked him in a tiny cell of not more than two square meters. And like many other prisoners he was forced to go naked to interrogations.

Nonetheless, he does not feel hatred for the Americans. He does not know them. He cannot say whether they are good or bad. He only hates what they did to his family and what they are doing to his people; he hates the chaos into which they have plunged his country.

The death squads of Shi'ite politicians can only commit their murders because the United States allow them to. Why do I only protest against Al-Qaeda and not against the murdering Americans? His murdered relatives were also civilians.

I do not reply, and Rami continues. His family have less and less to eat. Under the U.N. sanction regime, there was not enough to eat either, but now the situation is catastrophic, at least for his family. The food distribution points for Sunnis are often in neighbourhoods controlled by Shi'ite militia. Sometimes people go hungry for weeks on end.

These are all reasons why he is fighting with Al-Qaeda for the liberation of Iraq. The United States has destroyed everything he loves. He did not choose to be in this situation, and he doubts whether I really understand how much his people are suffering.

It is easy to pass judgment on resistance and terrorism if you are living in peace and prosperity. But he sees nothing but suffering, misery, humiliation, blood and death around him, Rami explains. Have I ever thought about what young people must have gone through, if they come to see no alternative but to blow themselves up? Then Rami says: "Stop attacking us and humiliating us. Get out of our country. Then Al-Qaeda will disappear all by itself." Rami turns around abruptly and leaves the room.

I remain alone with Abu Saeed in the dark room. I know that people in Germany will attack me for talking to members of Al-Qaeda. They will not for the most part be very interested in the fact that some Al-Qaeda fighters consider themselves to be moderate. But how can one fight this terrorist madness if one does not investigate it and try to understand the terrorists' motivation?

One reason why the counter-terrorism policies of the West have failed over the past few years is that most politicians have not adequately researched and addressed the phenomenon of terrorism. The Baker-Hamilton report reaches the sarcastic conclusion that while the United States knows all about the explosive devices used against its troops, it knows next to nothing about the people who set off those devices or their motives.

When I was a young judge I was involved for a few months in the trial of a terrorist, a member of the Red Army Faction. Terrorists killed a great friend of mine, Hanns Martin Schleyer, who was like a father to me. And when I was a youngster, I was well acquainted with someone who would later become a terrorist. I have thought long and hard about the problem of terrorism.

The main cause of terrorism is not need or poverty, but the perception that there is no way to remedy a situation held to be deeply unjust by legal means. The only effective strategy to combat terrorism must combine severity with justice. Severity alone is not enough. Without justice one cannot beat terrorism.

Abu Saeed sees that I am deep in thought and full of doubts. "Let's go," he says, "and don't be angry because you talked to somebody from Al-Qaeda. We have to talk to them. We have to beat the extremists and drive them from our country; the moderates among them we have to win over."

Zaid is standing outside and stares at me with an enquiring look on his face. He had sat the whole time with the men Abu Saeed had brought for me to meet. I tell him the conversations were very interesting. I had learned a lot, but there were things I could not confirm or check. I would have needed to spend more time with them in order to really understand what they feel and what they do. And I tell Zaid that I need his help.

The expression in his face again becomes distant. It is quite clear that he does not want to disclose the most painful chapters of his life. I ask him what he thinks of Al-Qaeda. "The foreign Al-Qaeda fighters are murderers," he says. "For Iraq, they are just as bad as the Americans. We have to drive them out of the country as well." We drive back to Al-Jazeera in silence.

Jubilation in Ramadi

Back at Abu Saeed's house, the whole family is again sitting in front of the television. The Iraqi national soccer team is on its victory tour of neighboring countries. In Dubai and Jordan, the squad receives a rousing welcome from thousands of exiled Iraqis.

The decisive goals are shown for the 100th time – the ones that led to the final and then the clincher that won Iraq the Asian Cup. The final was played five days ago, but Abu Saeed's extended family still can't get enough of it. Zaid also likes to look at the footage of Iraq's one and only international victory in years.

The Iraqi government has never once managed to bring a smile to people's faces, Zaid tells me, and we can never decide if it is Iran or the United States that is pulling its strings. But the Iraqi soccer team has filled the hearts of all Iraqis with joy and, magically, even brought a smile to the saddest faces.

Right after the final whistle, the whole of Ramadi rushed out onto the streets. Thousands were dancing, singing and celebrating. In a break with tradition, though, nobody fired into the air. That would have been just a little too dangerous. Who knows if the Americans would not have fired back, like at wedding parties in Afghanistan.

The Iraqi police and the Iraqi army also joined in the celebrations. When an American Humvee patrol came by, people blocked its path, with the approval of Iraqi police officers. One American Humvee driver got out and started to dance with the crowd. A little boy picked up a piece of melon rind and threw

it at his head. The American quickly got back into his vehicle. This was the Iraqis' party, not the Americans'," Zaid says with a laugh.

I ask him who his favourite soccer player is. Without hesitation he fires back: "Zinedine Zidane. He is the greatest, and he is an Arab and a Muslim."

"But what about that headbutt during the World Cup final between France and Italy?" I ask.

Zaid says he did not think that was right, nor did his friends. But when he heard that the Italian player Materazzi was said to have insulted Zidane's mother and sister and called him an Arab terrorist, then they could all sympathize with Zidane.

"You know," Zaid says, "sometimes you have it up to here; it is the last straw (which breaks a camels back). What Materazzi did to Zidane is what the West does with us Arabs all the time." Zidane's headbutt has a symbolic meaning. "But you Westerners wouldn't understand that."

It is now 10 o'clock in the evening and the women of the house have prepared another delicious meal and served it out on the lawn. We enjoy the food in silence. Zaid is going to spend the night here with us. We stay up late talking, not about politics or war, but about football. Suddenly, Zaid is once again a carefree, cheerful youngster, like millions of other boys around the world when they talk about soccer.

By the time I finally lie down on my foam mattress, it is 1 a.m.. Abu Saeed, Abu Hamid and Zaid are still playing dominoes. Apart from that, everything is just as usual: the power is out again, the two American helicopters have flown over the house a number of times, an American reconnaissance plane circles above the Sunni Triangle; the sky is full of twinkling stars, the moon shines through the crown of the tall palms; and I am yearning for five sweet hours of deep sleep - insha'Allah!

Zaid's Brothers

I only manage four hours. At 5 a.m. the call of the muezzin awakens me. I want to turn round and go right back to sleep, but Abu Saeed asks me to get up straightaway. He looks tense. We have to leave the house by 10 at the latest, he says. If I want to talk to Zaid today, I must rise immediately.

In Ramadi, word has got out that a foreigner is staying in Al-Jazeera. Abu Saeed has heard from friends in the police force that something is in the air. He cannot rule out the possibility that there might still be a few scattered Al-Qaeda terrorists in Ramadi. And if the Americans hear about me being here, that could spell serious trouble for Abu Saeed and his family.

The Americans would find it very suspicious that there is a Westerner in Ramadi, without permission from the Pentagon, who is talking to people who have not been briefed in advance. It is very unusual and does not fit with their PR strategy. That is why we should go and stay somewhere else for a while.

I get up without saying a word and shuffle like a boxer after a knockout to the shower, where a large mug of coffee is waiting for me. By 5.30 a.m., Zaid and I are sitting under a date palm and he is talking. The day is slowly dawning. Zaid has dark rings under his eyes. Perhaps he has not slept but was thinking all night about what he and his family have gone through in recent months.

Zaid talks very slowly and deliberately today. He is clearly trying to keep his emotions under control. He often breathes deeply, pauses, purses his lips.

Zaid is the oldest of three brothers. Haroun is one year younger, and Karim two years his junior. In July 2006, Haroun spends a few nights at his uncle's house in the centre of Ramadi. He is 19 at the time and studying engineering. It is summer break, and he is trying to enjoy it as best he can, given a war is underway.

Like his two brothers, he has little to do with the resistance. Though like all the youngsters in Ramadi, he helps the resistance fighters when they are looking for a hideout or need information. But Haroun does not play an active part.

On July 14, 2006, Haroun sets off early in the morning, before it gets too hot, from his uncle's house to go back to his family in Al-Sufia. He turns into the narrow street where his family lives, it is just after seven o'clock a.m.. He is dribbling a ball he found on the way.

In his right hand he is carrying a white bush rose which he picked for his mother at sunrise. He sees a young neighbour, Jarir, coming the other way, and calls out to greet him, salam – peace.

Just as he utters the word salam, a shot rings out. Haroun touches the back of his head in disbelief, sinks to his knees in what seems like slow-motion, and falls forwards with his face hitting the dust.

His lifeless body lies there in the dirt, the small white rose he selected for his mother in his right hand.

Jarir had darted for cover into the entry of an abandoned house. He stands there for hours without moving. One hour after the shooting, he sees a municipal fire truck come to collect Haroun's body and take it away. Fire trucks are the only vehicles allowed to drive in the city centre. Even

ambulances get shot at immediately. So fire trucks now also function as ambulances and hearses.

Other people living on the street heard the shot too, but nobody dared go out to see, scared of becoming the American snipers next target.

Jarir only dares to leave his hiding place in the afternoon. He runs to Zaid's house and tells the family that Haroun has been shot. Cries of despair, mourning and anger fill the house. Weeping and wailing, the members of his family cling to each other. It is unfathomable that Haroun is dead. They saw him only yesterday at his uncle's house.

The entire family then goes to the district morgue to see Haroun one last time, to say goodbye and to prepare the funeral. But when they get there, they discover Haroun has already been buried. Without a steady supply of electricity, the morgue cannot use its cold-storage facility; so the many corpses that are brought there daily have to be buried as quickly as possible.

The family cannot say goodbye or say the prescribed prayers that are customary at a burial. Perhaps nobody said them for Haroun. Zaid's parents, his two sisters, Lamyā and Maysun, Zaid and Karim walk home, crying and holding each other tight.

Zaid stops talking. I sense that he needs a break. He has put his hands over his eyes to hide his tears. His whole body shakes as he sobs. I get up and leave him alone for a few minutes. When he has regained his composure, I go back to Zaid. He looks exhausted, but he resumes his account.

Although Zaid and his 18-year-old brother Karim feel overwhelmingly sad for weeks as they mourn Haroun, they decide to concentrate on their studies. Karim has just completed his high school diploma and wants to study agriculture.

Zaid and Karim grow closer during this period. Zaid takes Karim along to games of soccer and tries to make sure they always play on the same team. Sometimes he even misses soccer practice to go swimming with Karim in the Euphrates, because Karim loves swimming so much.

In the fall, their studies resume. Zaid sees to it that the two do their homework together in the afternoons. Whenever Karim stares into the distance with blank eyes, Zaid knows that he is thinking of Haroun. Zaid then often tells Karim a funny story.

Weeks and months pass. In early 2007, heavy fighting erupts in Ramadi again. Zaid's family home is not damaged, but on January 5, in the evening, a missile fired from an American helicopter hits right beside the house and destroys a generator that provided electricity to their house and some others

nearby.

The panic-stricken family keep their heads down, run away from the fighting as fast as they can. They go to the house of an uncle a few hundred meters away. Arriving completely out of breath, they suddenly realize that they had forgotten to turn off the kerosene heaters. Karim decides he will run back.

He opens the door and looks cautiously right and left to see if the coast is clear. As he runs off, Zaid calls after him: "Be careful!" At that moment there is a burst of machine-gun fire in the road. Less than 30 meters from their uncle's house, Karim collapses, riddled by American bullets.

Zaid is about to dash out and rescue Karim, but his sisters hold him back. Zaid hates violence; he never got into fights at school and he never commits a foul in soccer; but now something snaps inside him.

Shrieking with pain and fury, Zaid is determined to go out and fetch the body of his little brother lying in a large pool of blood in the middle of the road. And he wants to go after the Americans - and kill at least one with his bare hands, even though bursts of machine-gun fire still resound outside.

His father holds Zaid back, his mother grabs his T-shirt and will not let go. They all clasp each other tight; the whole family is wailing and crying in despair. Zaid beats the wall with his fists and sobs: "I have to go and get my brother, perhaps he is still alive." But his parents and his sister are terrified of losing Zaid as well and do not let him go.

The whole night the family looks out through the small kitchen window. Just a few meters away Karim is lying in the dark pool of his blood. Gunfire continues. Shots hit the door of the house. It is impossible to retrieve Karim's body.

At about nine in the morning the fire truck arrives. Shielded by its bulk, the family rushes out into the road, but it is much too late. Zaid carefully lifts the body of his little brother and carries it to the fire truck. He lays it on a stretcher in the back of the vehicle and sits down beside the body, rests his head on Karim's chest, and starts to cry.

Zaid's eyes fill with tears, and I put my hand on his shoulder. He looks past me, as tears roll down his cheeks. I am about to leave him alone again, but he holds me tight, takes a couple of deep breaths, and carries on telling me his story. He wants to get it over and done with now.

His lips quiver, he runs his hands through his thick hair. The wounds left by Karim's death seven months ago have not healed.

Zaid and his family accompany Karim in the fire truck to a mosque, where they recite the Islamic prayers for the dead. At midday, they bury him. Despondent and empty, they walk home. Zaid's father looks frail and walks slowly. He has aged years in this one night.

Zaid's family could not bury Karim next to Haroun. The rules imposed by the occupying power would not permit them to drive to the district where Haroun is buried. The rules are strict, special wishes are not considered.

What happened on the night of January 5, 2007, did not only change Zaid's father, but Zaid as well. It has transformed him. He tells me quietly that after the death of his little brother he realized that it was not enough to just support the resistance passively. He comes to the conclusion that he must do more – like most of his friends.

The number of dead in Ramadi is now in the thousands. Almost every family has lost somebody. "Do you know that they have turned the soccer pitches into cemeteries in Ramadi?" he asks me. "There isn't enough room in the real cemeteries."

Zaid despises Al-Qaeda because not only does it fight the Americans in Ramadi, but also anyone who tries to stand up to it – ordinary people, tribal leaders, physicians, engineers and workers – and it does so with great brutality. So he could only consider joining the moderate Islamist resistance movements, independent nationalist organizations or the Ba'athis resistance. Zaid finds it hard to make up his mind; he has no clear preference. He just knows that he must do something.

At the Center of the Resistance

Abu Saeed has been standing behind us in silence for some minutes. "We have to go," he says, "otherwise we could be in trouble, and we still have a lot to do." It is 9.30 a.m.

I pack my things and throw them in the back of the car. Zaid comes with us. Abu Saeed asks me to cover my head in the traditional Arab way with a ghutra and agal, a head-scarf held in place with a thick black cord.

We drive along bumpy lanes and pot-holed roads towards the centre of town. We go through countless checkpoints. Seated in the back of the Chevrolet with tinted windows, wearing Arab dress, I remain inconspicuous. My dapper moustache proves useful, though it is starting to tickle annoyingly.

Downtown Ramadi is closed to cars; at the point where people and goods transfer to small brightly painted tartorahs or tricycles, we turn into a side street lined with houses that look like villas. As Musa slows down in front of

one of the houses, the large garden gate opens as if by magic, we turn in, and the gate closes at once behind us.

A number of dignified looking men aged between 40 and 60 welcome me at the door. They and I are all wearing white dishdashas and ghutras with black agals.

Abu Saeed tells me in a whisper that they are top-level leaders of the resistance in Anbar province. The oldest, Abu Bassim, used to be a four-star general. Abu Saeed does not reveal which of the five is the commander-in-chief; I have to find that out for myself. Abu Bassim is just the host.

We enter a cool room. The air conditioning is powered by the house's own generator. It is so effective that I am freezing. Abu Bassim, who likes his colleague changes residence every few weeks as a security precaution, offers me an armchair next to the air conditioning unit. The curtains are drawn to keep out the sun, and perhaps for security reasons as well.

Once my eyes have adjusted to the dim light, I see lying on a simple bed a man of about 30 with a big head and a crew cut. I go over to talk to him. His name is Samir, and he is paralyzed from the waist down. While the commanders of the resistance in Anbar province talk quietly with Abu Saeed, Samir tells me how he came to be severely wounded.

In early 2006, he was driving with his friend Yaser in his Mitsubishi on a country road from Ramadi towards Baghdad, where they were going to visit a physician. As they were passing through a village, they suddenly got caught in a tailback; Yaser had to stop in the middle of a crossroads. At that moment an armoured Humvee appeared out of the side road and rammed the Mitsubishi. The car was pushed off the road, overturned and totally wrecked. Yaser was killed at once; and he, Samir, was trapped between the passenger seat and the dashboard.

The armoured Humvee was not even damaged. Its driver backed up and then drove off, without paying any further attention to the people in the wrecked Mitsubishi. Samir never found out who the driver of the Humvee was.

They had to use a welding torch to free him from the Mitsubishi, Samir tells me. In the hospital they tell him five of his thoracic vertebrae have been smashed and he will be paralyzed for the rest of his life. He thinks every day of his dead friend. But his own body is dead as well.

I ask him if he had been active in the resistance. He laughs and says that almost every Iraqi is in the resistance but that he had not been active as a fighter. Some of his cousins joined right at the start. Nine of them were locked up in Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 as a consequence. Four were killed when an attempt was made to free them that September. During the fighting, the

Americans had taken them as a cover and simply used them as human shields.

They held him as well, for a month and a half in Abu Ghraib in 2004, Samir tells me. "We were treated like animals.

They beat us, kicked us and spat at us. There was loud noise day and night. They wanted to force us to eat pork, which the Qur'an says we may not do. But we did not touch it. So for days we had nothing to eat."

About 60 of his relatives have been killed so far - brothers and sisters, uncles, cousins. But who cares about that in the West? There they count the dead Americans very carefully, no one bothers any more to count the dead Iraqis properly.

The fact that many Iraqi civilians have been killed by Al-Qaeda and radical Shi'ite militias does not in any way absolve the United States of their liability "The Americans have brought these plagues down upon our country. They bear the responsibility. Before the Americans marched in, there were no terrorists in our country and no sectarian violence."

Twelve people have now gathered in the large living room, and the mood is bitter. As host, Abu Bassim now formally welcomes me in the name of his family and friends. I am the first Westerner who did not come to Ramadi in an American helicopter, Humvee or armored personnel carrier and the first to come without a press officer or military bodyguards and the first who does not spend his nights in a fortified American army camp. For that he offers me his sincere thanks.

It means that I at least have a chance, Abu Bassim continues, to discover the truth. He is amazed that so many Western journalists rely on American officers to tell them about the situation of the people in Iraq. It is obvious that the Pentagon does not want to reveal the true extent of the tragedy.

Imagine if a journalist accompanying German troops in occupied Poland in 1943 wrote about the situation of the Polish population on the basis of what he was told by a German press officer, says Abu Bassim.

I tell him that for most correspondents being an "embedded journalist" is the only way to get to see Iraq at all; that is just the way it is in occupied countries. He replies calmly that I am proof that there are indeed alternatives. But, I tell him, I could not make such a trip several times a year and that I probably do not get to see everything either; I also have to make many compromises.

Abu Bassim says: "That is true, but you have come to see the victims of this war; almost all the others visit the perpetrators." That means the Pentagon has

in effect a monopoly on information. Not a single journalist has spoken to the resistance in Ramadi over the past four and a half years. Many do not even know that such a resistance movement exists, even though it is second only to American forces here in Iraq in terms of military might.

"Reports from the front" in Ramadi published in the international press are often identical, down to the last detail. Reporters often just pass on verbatim what American press officers tell them, so they rave about all the improvements in the supply of electricity, water and gas, though in fact the opposite is the case. These journalists do not spend any time with real Iraqi families. They just repeat what they are told by the American officers at their side. And those officers have not spent time with ordinary Iraqi families either. This kind of reporting is ridiculous.

The rosy picture the Pentagon presents to the media of the situation in certain Iraqi cities, especially in recent months, does not correspond to reality, and will not do so for a long time. There has been too much pain and suffering, not just in Ramadi, but across Iraq.

I tell Abu Bassim that I think his criticism is too sweeping; I have read many well-informed and fair-minded articles about Iraq, in the German and in the American press. For me, the "embedded journalists" are for the most part particularly courageous reporters. They risk their life to do their job. Almost 200 journalists have already been killed in Iraq.

At the same time, I think to myself that his criticism is in part justified. Many media outlets are not nearly critical enough of statements from the Pentagon; and my method of gathering information, which Abu Bassim so welcomes, will cause me no end of problems when I get back home.

I change the subject and ask him about the military situation in Ramadi. Abu Bassim tells me that after the fall of Fallujah, most of which was reduced to rubble by U.S. bombing in 2004, Ramadi became the centre of the Iraqi resistance. And apart from a few neighbourhoods, the entire city came under the control of the resistance. The 450,000 residents supported the resistance from the start. The American General James Mattis once said that the whole region would go to hell if Ramadi fell.

Morale among the American occupation troops was bad from the start. His tribe helped a number of American soldiers desert, and smuggled them across the border into Jordan. The GIs paid an average of 600 dollars just to get out of Iraq. And they had to hand over their uniforms and weapons. But they were happy to do so. In exchange they were given an Iraqi dishdasha.

Abu Bassim says he himself helped five American soldiers flee. They came to an agreed meeting point in their Humvees, got out, changed their clothes, and handed over their weapons and 600 dollars. After dark they were taken

to Jordan. The next morning helicopters flew over the Humvees several times, and when the crews failed to establish contact with the GIs, they bombed the Humvees.

The unusually high suicide rate among American soldiers after they return home also indicates what a devastating experience the mad war in Iraq is for many. There have been reports on this phenomenon in the American and Arab media.³¹ The number of such suicides is considerably higher than the number of American soldiers actually killed in Iraq.

There were fierce battles around Ramadi for two and a half years. The Americans launched several major offensives in June 2006. They stormed hundreds of houses, in order to "cleanse" them and take "insurgents and terrorists" prisoner, as they put it. They were unimaginably brutal. They often blew out the doors with grenades. For months there was fighting in the streets of Ramadi.

The city was also subjected to aerial bombardment. Parts of the centre came to resemble Beirut after the civil war. In November 2006, countless civilians were killed in bombing raids - some just were sitting at an Internet café. Many women and children were among the victims.

As usual, the U.S. forces initially denied that. When photos of the bodies surfaced, they started talking about unavoidable collateral damage. In his estimation, Abu Bassim continues, one has to multiply by at least 10 the Iraqi casualty figures released by the Pentagon to get anywhere close to the truth.

The resistance was far superior to the U.S. troops. In late 2006, the American press published secret Pentagon reports that stated that the United States had lost Ramadi and that the marines didn't stand a chance against the "insurgents"; the two-and-a-half-year battle for Ramadi was lost.

Unfortunately, its significance as a centre of the Iraqi resistance and its relative proximity to Baghdad also attracted Al-Qaeda to Ramadi.³² Al-Qaeda fighters came in droves, and have done terrible damage. The Jordanian Al-Zarqawi spent a lot of time in Ramadi and the surrounding area. In its megalomania, Al-Qaeda even declared Ramadi the centre of the liberated "Islamic Republic of Iraq."

Hundreds of Al-Qaeda terrorists joined the fighting in Ramadi. In the early days, there was some limited cooperation between the Iraqi resistance and Al-Qaeda. But then Al-Qaeda besmirched the honour of the Iraqi resistance, both here and in Baghdad: Its commandos did not only shoot at the enemy, but would fire indiscriminately at civilians as well. They turned Ramadi into Iraq's Wild West.

The resistance has always been proud of its commitment to spare civilians. "This young man is a fine example of that," Abu Bassim says as he points to Zaid, who blushes deeply.

Even the leadership of the resistance has evidently heard the story of Zaid aborting a remote detonation because an old man was near where the explosive device was to go off.

On YouTube you can see footage of a similar event, he says. A resistance fighter has an American soldier in his sights; every time he is about to pull the trigger, he sees a child running past the soldier. After a few minutes the resistance fighter gives up. If I want to, he will show me the clip, Abu Bassim says. I note once again that the Internet revolution has also reached Iraq.

None of his people is permitted to kill civilians, while the foreign fighters of Al-Qaeda do so mercilessly and without restraint. For him, Abu Bassim continues, that marks the boundary between resistance and terrorism. Al-Qaeda and the militias that kill civilians are quite simply murderers. Al-Qaeda has been responsible for almost 10 percent of the civilian deaths in Ramadi - the rate here is probably higher than in other parts of the country.

The city's resistance groups and the tribal elders of Anbar agreed to take on these mostly foreign murderers and to drive them out of Ramadi. About half the tribes even decided to call a temporary ceasefire with the Americans in order to pursue that goal. Of course, that also involved a lot of dollars changing hands.

In June 2007, a conference was held on this issue at the Mansour Melia Hotel, near the Green Zone in Baghdad. Some tribal elders from Anbar took part. A bomb attack aimed at the conference participants killed 12 people.

As that attack demonstrates, many people were opposed to the local deals made in Anbar with the Americans. The only point on which all agree is the need to fight Al-Qaeda.

I suddenly remember that my original plan was to visit Baghdad in June 2007, and that in my visa application I had given the Mansour Melia Hotel as the place where I would be staying.

Abu Bassim continues: The strategy of focusing on Al-Qaeda paid off. The worst Al-Qaeda terrorists, almost all foreigners, were chased away. It went quite fast. The people of Ramadi simply showed Al-Qaeda the red card. Nowhere in the world can guerrilla fighters survive without popular support.

In the other provinces of Iraq as well, more and more people reject Al-Qaeda. Iraqi members are leaving in droves. The totalitarian inhuman ideology of this terrorist organization is completely alien to Iraqis. "The Iraqis are fed up with Al-Qaeda," says Abu Bassim. "We also want to liberate our country

ourselves. We do not need the help of any foreign fanatics."

Abu Bassim says he knows that the ceasefire also gave the U.S. troops a breather, but that was a price worth paying to increase the safety of the civilian population, which had been worn down and exhausted by American bombing raids and the senseless killing sprees of Al-Qaeda terrorists.

There have been such ceasefires in the history of all liberation movements the world over. They give the resistance an opportunity to regroup and organize. Resistance is not homogenous or continuous, but ebbs and flows. The Americans should have learnt this lesson from Vietnam.

The resistance did not care that the U.S. government sold this ceasefire to the world media as one of its great successes, Abu Bassim continues. "We know that the Pentagon flies entire press delegations into the centre of Ramadi to show off success at last."

The U.S. government will not be issuing any balanced analyses or reliable figures before the presidential election in late 2008. What the Pentagon does not show the journalists they invite to Ramadi is the "four kilometre zone", protected by armoured Humvees and hermetically sealed by American and Iraqi security forces - an area in which they can move freely. To get through the security ring to enter the zone, you have to show your papers at countless police and military checkpoints. It takes hours. Sometimes you just do not get through at all.

But these flaunting events do not interest us: We shall never accept the American occupation, says Abu Bassim. More than three quarters of the Iraqi population demand the withdrawal of the U.S. armed forces. We have time, the Americans do not. We had to endure the British for many years after the First World War. The Americans will have to depart much more quickly - way sooner than they can imagine.

The Iraqi resistance is everywhere and nowhere. We strike when and where we choose. It could be tomorrow in Ramadi, or in one year from now. We know that we shall win this war. And the Americans know that they have lost it and have to leave. Eventually, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps the day after tomorrow - insha'Allah!

I ask Abu Bassim whether Iraqis also share responsibility for the horrible terrorist violence that the world sees almost every evening on the television news. Abu Bassim nods. There are indeed Iraqi terrorists as well, he concedes. "In Al-Qaeda and in the militias."

The occupiers and their agents, however, are responsible for half the violent deaths in Iraq - a fact that many like to overlook. Abu Bassim estimates that a further 30 percent are the work of the Shi'ite militias, between five and 10

percent that of Al-Qaeda, and that the private U.S. "security contractors" and common Iraqi criminals are responsible for the rest. Nobody has precise figures.

The policies of the occupiers and the terrorism and the suffering they have caused have also led to "ethnic cleansing." Sunnis are driven out of mainly Shi'ite areas, and Shi'ites out of Sunni regions. In Anbar province as well, Al-Qaeda drove Shi'ites out of some villages. There are things of which he as an Iraqi cannot be proud, Abu Bassim tells me.

He points out, however, that under international law the occupying forces are responsible for the security of the population. "We have not created this catastrophic situation. The United States bear the legal and moral responsibility - and not only for those they kill themselves." Almost all the terrorist suicide attacks, which the international community rightly deplores, are masterminded abroad - by Al-Qaeda and Iran, but also by paid agents of the United States.

For example, Abu Bassim continues, he knows an Iraqi translator who worked for a long time for U.S. troops, the U.S. secret service and for Blackwater. At some point a dispute erupted, which led to the loss of mutual trust. So the translator was very surprised when one day a go-between of the Americans came to him and asked him to go to Kirkuk in an official car and to meet an Iraqi contact there near the market square. He was told to call a certain number on his cell phone as soon as he reached the square for further instructions.

The translator set off for Kirkuk, pleased to have been offered more work despite the earlier falling-out. On the way he started thinking about the strange instructions. So instead of calling the given number from the market place in Kirkuk, he parked the car on an empty construction site and walked several hundred meters away before calling the number.

As he pressed the green call button, the car exploded. There was a huge cloud of flames and smoke. If he had called from the market place as he had been told to do, he would have been killed, along with countless innocent people.

And the media would have reported that another Iraqi suicide bomber had blown himself up at a crowded market. The spiral of hatred between the different communities would have intensified further. The translator never contacted his former employers again and now works in the resistance - under his command, Abu Bassim tells me.

There is a breathless silence in the room. Zaid is also staring in fascination at Abu Bassim. He had never seen a senior leader of the resistance in Anbar province before. I am astonished by the fact that Abu Saeed brought Zaid along to this meeting.

In an adjacent room, women I never get to see have prepared an evening meal of grilled carp – something I loved to eat on the banks of the Tigris in Baghdad before the war – and kebabs, grilled chicken, lots of vegetables and delicious honeydew and water melon.

As in almost all Muslim countries, people eat with their bare hands out of common bowls. Abu Saeed keeps picking out particularly fine pieces of fish or chicken for me and holds them up to my mouth with his right hand, as a brother would do. I really cannot warm to this way of being fed, so each time I ask Abu Saeed to put the morsels on my plate. I cover them discreetly with a piece of pita bread and hope nobody notices.

After the meal it is time for night prayers, and then the endless discussion resumes. I am asked what European governments think of the resistance. I do not know the answer; nor do the governments, I suspect. Abu Bassim tells me the resistance would like to establish contact with governments in Europe, to explore ways to create a just peace in Iraq. He says the high command of the nationalist resistance – which evidently knows about my visit – expressly requested that he convey this message.

I ask Abu Bassim, who is a Sunni, if, after the Americans pull out, he could accept a Shi'ite head of government and a cabinet and a parliament with two thirds of their members Shi'ites – which is quite likely given the structure of the population.

Abu Bassim looks perplexed. Are government positions and parliamentary seats assigned in the United States or Germany on the basis of religious denomination?

That is medieval nonsense. He says I am repeating almost verbatim the very argument of the Americans that led to the terrible chaos in Iraq in the first place.

I know that he is not altogether wrong, but I nevertheless ask again what would happen if, after the American troops are withdrawn, free elections led, for whatever reason, to a large Shi'ite majority?

"If a Shi'ite government is elected in an honourable, patriotic and free manner, then we shall of course accept it. Without a doubt." The men in the group nod their heads in agreement.

One problem with the current government, one of the men says, is that quite a high percentage of its members also have Iranian passports. "We do not want a pro-Iranian government," adds another. "And nor do the majority of Shi'ites in Iraq."³⁵

For the first time this evening Abu Bassim laughs. As you probably know, he says to me, after the invasion the Americans published a set of 55 playing cards bearing the photos of the men on their most-wanted list, the most powerful political and military leaders in Saddam Hussein's regime. Thirty-six of the 55, about two thirds of the men, were Shi'ites. That is indisputable proof that the assertion that Iraq is divided into religious communities that have been at each others' throats since time immemorial is rubbish – invented as an attempt to break Iraq from within by those who have failed to conquer it from without.

I ask Abu Bassim what he thinks will happen when the Americans leave. He answers briefly and drily: If the resistance and the people concentrate on fighting terrorism and on driving out the militias, that problem will soon be resolved. Ramadi is the proof.

We do not need the Americans to achieve that, Abu Bassim says. He cannot understand the West's arrogant argument that the Americans must stay in Iraq to prevent civil war. It is like saying that a sick physician who has brought the plague and cholera into a country must stay to combat the plague and cholera.

When the Americans are gone, Al-Qaeda loses its main enemy, and thus its main argument for being here. The few remaining Iraqi members would soon abandon their leaders. The same is true of the Shi'ite and Sunni militias. Most members are merely fellow travellers. It will not take long to deal with the rest. In Iraq, there is no Hindu Kush where the terrorists could hide.

In any case, the American government knowingly exaggerates the strength of Al-Qaeda. There have never been more than 3,000 foreign Al-Qaeda fighters in Iraq. The number now is more likely 2,000 or even lower. But Bush desperately needs Al-Qaeda in order to remain in Iraq. Al-Qaeda is his last remaining justification for the war. But within weeks of an American withdrawal, Al-Qaeda will simply vanish.

"The chaos came with the Americans, and it will go with the Americans. A swift withdrawal is only bad for the Americans. For the Iraqis it is good."

The American withdrawal would take at least six months, Abu Bassim says with a smirk. "In that time we will rebuild our army and our police. They will be multi-denominational and multi-ethnic. And above all it will be successful."

Much of the military and government elite fled the country because of the Americans. Most of them will return when the U.S. troops are gone.

The reason why the United States is failing to establish an effective army and efficient police force is obvious: "The really good soldiers and police officers

refuse to cooperate with the Americans. They are either not in the country or in the resistance."

"But what if a civil war does erupt?" I ask again. Abu Bassim looks at me very earnestly as he replies: "The chaos in Iraq cannot get any worse than it is now. But even if it were to, that is a matter for the Iraqis to deal with themselves. We are a tribal society. Over the course of their long history, the Iraqi tribes have always succeeded in overcoming their differences. And they will continue to do so in the future."

It is past midnight when I take one of the foam mattresses Abu Bassim has provided and look for a quiet corner to sleep in his garden. The spot I choose is almost romantic - under a small orange tree, and surrounded by palm trees. These are not times to be too choosy about where to sleep.

I see that the other men have not gone to bed but are sitting in a corner of the garden; some are playing dominoes. I still do not know which of them is the leader of the resistance.

Abu Bassim's five-year-old grandson Abdullah has been allowed to stay up late. He is watching the game intently; for him it is no doubt much more interesting than our long conversations.

Zaid's Resistance

It was a wonderful night. I slept until eight o'clock in the morning. Abu Saeed tells me with a laugh that all attempts to wake me had failed. Almost everybody had tried shaking me, but I just slept on peacefully with a smile on my face. But now we definitely have to go. From now on, we shall have to spend every night in a different location. Word of my visit has got out.

I just have time to take a quick shower and brush my teeth, and we are off. This time we take a different route. After a short stop in Al-Sufia, where we take some photos, we suddenly arrive back at Abu Saeed's house at about 11 a.m.

I am surprised and ask why we have come back here, given that we had to leave in a hurry the day before. Abu Saeed laughs. Just as I did not expect us to return to Al-Jazeera, he explains, others will not either. Then he goes to greet his family and little Ali. They are no doubt another reason why he wanted to return home.

I go with Zaid into the reception room, which is dark even during the day. The gang of rascally children is sitting unusually still in front of the television. They are watching with great concentration the arrival of the Iraqi national soccer team in Baghdad on the commercial Iraqi station Al Sharqiya,

which broadcasts from Dubai.

The players have actually dared to spend 30 hours in their own capital city – but only in the Green Zone, the fortress compound in which the American military commanders and the Iraqi government have barricaded themselves. Some of the soccer stars, who are all under contract in other countries, have returned to Iraq for the first time in years.

Only carefully selected Iraqis are permitted to enter the Green Zone to cheer and wave at the team. But that does not worry the children of Abu Saeed and Abu Hamid. Their team has come home and is only 110 kilometres away. And that is just great.

One of the boys starts a cushion fight, and all hell breaks loose as the children laugh and wallop each other. But they stop immediately when Akram, Abu Saeed's 18-year-old nephew, enters the room. He has got hold of his uncle's cell phone and now they can play games on it. The children crowd around Akram, who keeps glancing at the door, in case his uncle comes looking for his phone.

After half an hour, they lose interest in the phone and start to tell each other stories. They talk quietly, as Zaid has fallen asleep next to me. It is evidently time for a little siesta.

Outside it is 44 degrees; here in the reception room it is nice and cool. Surprisingly enough, the air conditioning is working.

From where I am sitting, I look into the lobby, where a small gold-framed mirror, about 40 centimetres tall, is hanging on one of the walls. None of the boys passes the mirror without checking how he looks and picking up the brush lying in front of the mirror to refresh his hairstyle – either pulling his hair back or brushing it forward.

Even Abu Hamid, who does not have much hair left on his head, smooths it lovingly every time he passes the mirror. Who knows how long there will be any left to caress?

To the left of the mirror is the door leading to the private quarters of the families of Abu Saeed and Abu Hamid. That is where the women and girls usually spend the day. I notice that the women keep peeking round the door at me and whispering. It is not everyday that they get to see a doctor from Germany dozing in Ramadi.

I would love to know what they are saying. When they see that I am also observing them, they quickly disappear behind the door – only to take another peek just moments later.

Abu Saeed has joined me and offers me some tea. I accept and thank him, turning away from his family's private quarters. I do not wish to offend him.

A few minutes later his wife Aisha comes and sits beside him. I ask Abu Saeed if I may take a photo of the two of them. He answers in a friendly but firm tone that that would be out of the question.

His wife has a different view of the matter. She gives me a quick smile, and in gentle loving tones tries to persuade her husband. It takes all of two minutes, and Abu Saeed gives in. It is clear who wears the pants in this family.

I take some pictures of the two of them. In the end they let me photograph Aisha together with their daughter Shala. Then we look at the pictures on my digital camera. Aisha is very pleased. She utters a cheerful shukran, thank you, and leaves the room.

While we were taking pictures, Zaid woke up. He enjoyed watching Aisha wind Abu Saeed around her little finger. "That is our fate," I quip, and Zaid nods in agreement.

I ask Zaid what his greatest dream is. "Peace," he replies. And then a large family, at least 12 children, "so there will be lots of action at home!" Just two or three children would be boring, he says. If God grants him and his wife children, he will name their two first sons Haroun and Karim after his brothers. Zaid falls silent. The memory of his slain brothers casts a shadow over his face.

After a while he starts to talk again: His wife should be well-behaved and very pretty. It will be up to her whether to wear a headscarf, a hijab, but he would certainly prefer that. It is part of their religion, and religion is important. The Virgin Mary - he calls her Maryam - also wears a veil on the pictures he has seen. But he will not argue with his wife about the hijab and she will certainly not have to cover her entire body with a black abaya.

He could imagine marrying a Shi'ite or Kurdish woman. "But what about a foreigner?" I ask. Of course, Zaid answers, if he loves her and if she loves him, why not? "You Westerners ask funny questions." Zaid sounds almost offended.

"We have the same dreams as you. I would like to have a large family and a big Japanese car - your German cars are too expensive - and eventually, if I work hard and am successful, a little house of my own. I think you can achieve anything if you work hard."

To try to make these dreams come true, Zaid will have to wait a long time, and he knows it. There is a war raging in his country, his brothers are dead, and he is a resistance fighter. Any day could be his last, even if for the

moment there is a ceasefire in downtown Ramadi. He could be asked to join an operation anywhere in the region tomorrow.

I ask him what he associates with the name "United States." When he was a child, he admired the United States because it was a land of progress and advancement - despite the harsh and painful sanctions imposed on Iraq. But the war has made him change his mind completely. That holds true for the entire Muslim world.

"We have never done anything to them, and still they have destroyed our country and our lives." He doubts he can ever forgive the Americans for the death of his brothers. He will never forget those hours as his little brother bled to death in front of his very eyes, never ever.

Then I ask the question Zaid most dreads - and that I most dread as well. I ask when he first took part in an attack on American troops. "Four months ago, in April 2007," he tells me after a long pause.

After Karim died, he decided to join a group made up of nationalists and Ba'athists. Each member has a specific task. One plans attacks, another explores possible sites, some are specialists in making roadside bombs, others in hiding them in the ground, and others still are experts in the use of RPGs - rocket propelled grenades.

He is responsible for remote detonations, Zaid tells me. He received a thorough training. He builds the detonators out of old cell phones and TV remote controls. It is not difficult. In effect, he decides whether a bomb goes off or not.

Zaid, Abu Saeed and I are now alone in the reception room. Abu Saeed has sent all the others away. Abu Hamid is standing in front of the door to stop anyone entering the room. I ask Zaid if it did not terrify him to have the power to decide whether young American soldiers will live or die.

Zaid clenches his teeth. The American soldiers did not think twice before targeting and shooting his brothers, he retorts. He knows that many people in America are against this war, but they re-elected Bush despite his lies and despite the death of 100,000 Iraqis and of many American soldiers.

He knows that there are decent American soldiers in Ramadi. Many of them are also against the war. Once some American soldiers detained a young Iraqi and beat him up badly. An American officer intervened and took the Iraqi boy to his small office and cleaned, disinfected and dressed his wounds. He would like to meet this officer, when there is peace. But now it is war. He hopes nothing happens to this American.

The most important thing when launching an attack is to make sure that no civilians are harmed or killed, Zaid says. The life of civilians is sacred to him. Even if he could blow up the entire headquarters of the U.S. army in Ramadi, he would not do it if that also meant killing just one civilian.

It is the greatest of crimes to kill civilians. "To kill an innocent person is worse than destroying the Ka'ba in Mecca a thousand times," he says. He has never injured or killed a civilian and will never do so, nor would he kill or harm civilians from other countries or of different faiths. The Qur'an explicitly forbids it.

This is a very important point for Zaid; it was a central issue for almost everyone I spoke to in Iraq. Zaid sets out his position with great clarity and seriousness. He is a resistance fighter and not a terrorist.

What he does, he says, is done in self-defense, and is therefore permissible. He will not wait until the Americans also murder his sisters and parents. Beyond a certain point, resistance is not just a right, but a duty. This became clear to him with the death of his second brother at the latest. He must follow this road to the end now, until the Americans leave the country.

Zaid adds calmly: "You would not just stand by and watch if they shot your brothers or sisters in front of your very eyes. Nobody would, anywhere in the world."

In April 2007, Zaid and four other members of his group go one night to a spot they had earlier identified on Ishrin Street. Before morning prayers they dig a hole beside the road, place an explosive device in the hole and carefully fill it in again, and sprinkle sand over it.

The device was a nimsawiya shell; nimsawiya means 'Austrian.' This kind of shell was originally made for an Austrian-built gun. The replicas made in Iraq are about 60 centimetres long and seven-and-a-half centimetres in diameter.

Zaid takes up position 100 meters away behind a wall. From here, he has a good view of the street and the spot where they buried the bomb. He waits for the military convoy that comes down Ishrin Street every morning.

The two hours Zaid waits feel endless. Suddenly, at 7.30 a.m., he spots the first sand-colored Humvee in the distance.

He knows that in about one minute he will have to press the button on the small remote detonation device that he himself had constructed.

It felt like slow motion, Zaid recalls, as the Humvees approached the spot. For a moment he sees before his mind's eye the faces of young helmeted American soldiers in their armoured Humvees; they of course know they are

driving down the most dangerous street in Ramadi; they are probably as scared as he is of dying at any moment in this mad war; perhaps they are joking, trying to encourage and cheer each other up.

But Zaid only thinks for that one moment about the American GIs; then he remembers Haroun and Karim lying in pools of blood. He remembers how his sisters and parents cried and held him back and how he pounded with his fists on the wall that separated him from his dying brother.

The Humvees are just a few meters from the spot where the bomb is to explode. Zaid's whole body is shaking. Because he has tears in his eyes, recalling about Haroun and Karim, he can only see the Humvees indistinctly. He knows the moment has come to detonate. He closes his eyes. But he cannot do it. "Press the button!" he tells himself. A thousand images race through his head.

Then he depresses the detonator. He does not see how the first two Humvees are hurled into the air, or how a huge cloud of black smoke rises above Ishrin Street, or how the fragments of the vehicles fall back to the ground as if in slow motion. He does hear the massive dull thud of the blast.

Zaid runs away along the planned escape route, avoiding American and Iraqi checkpoints. He runs faster than he has ever run in his whole life, until he has left the city center. Then he tries to breathe deeply and walk at a normal pace.

When he reaches home, he goes into his bedroom, which he used to share with his two brothers and which is now his alone. His parents are already in their grocery store next door.

Zaid throws himself on his mattress and buries his face in a pillow. He tries to clear his mind and order his thoughts, but he fails. He keeps seeing those young American soldiers, hearing the sound of the explosion, and then seeing Haroun and Karim.

At about 10 o'clock his sisters tug gently at his shirt; with a gruff gesture he tells them to leave him alone. He lies there well into the afternoon. When his mother asks if anything is wrong, he shakes his head and buries his head again in his pillow.

He does not get up until evening, when he goes to meet the other members of his group. They are all there. Rashid, who had remained at his secure observation post after the explosion, reports that two Humvees were completely destroyed and that at least three American soldiers were killed, and several more injured.

After the blast more Humvees and several ambulances rushed to the scene. American soldiers stormed nearby houses and secured the area. As usual,

they took away a number of sleepy young Iraqis who had had nothing to do with the blast. Then special vehicles came to carry away the wrecks of the Humvees. They cleaned up the area, trying to remove all traces of the attack.

Zaid listens to this report in silence. His friends want to congratulate him on his first military success, but he turns away and leaves. Zaid does not want to talk to anyone.

He goes down to the bank of the Euphrates, to the gentle rise from which Karim liked to jump into the water. He sits there for hours, his head utterly empty. Now there is no escape and no way back: he has become part of this hateful war. He has known that since he saw Karim bleed to death.

Zaid, Abu Saeed and I are sitting together in silence. I want to ask a thousand questions, but I see the sadness and bitterness in Zaid's eyes: He has so many reasons to be sad and bitter.

I know that there is one more question I have to ask Zaid - for my sake and for the sake of those who will read his story. I ask if he ever thinks of the parents of the young American soldiers he has killed. Those parents and even those sons might also have been against this war, just as he is.

Zaid looks at me long and hard, and answers with another question: "Have these people ever thought about my family, even for a moment? Do American families, does anybody in the West ever think of the countless Iraqi families that have lost children, brothers, sisters, or parents? Why should I think about the families of the soldiers who murdered my brothers? "I cannot do that, and I do not want to. They have destroyed our country with their tanks, and they have ruined the lives of my family. They have no right or reason to be here."

Zaid stands up and leaves the room. Abu Saeed and I look at each other in silence. His little son Ali comes in with his half-deflated football. He wants to play with me. But playing is the last thing I can do at this very moment.

Aisha

Suddenly Abu Saeed's wife Aisha is standing next to us. She saw Zaid leave the room, deathly pale and overwrought. She evidently heard some of the conversation. She talks to me in her wonderful gentle voice. Abu Saeed does not translate what she says, but tells her that our discussion with Zaid was nothing for women. In kind but firm tones, Aisha tells Abu Saeed that he is wrong and asks him to translate what she has to say. As usual, Abu Saeed backs down, and starts to interpret her words.

Of course women are deeply concerned about this war, Aisha tells me. After all, they are the mothers of the resistance fighters. "Zaid's mother Amira and I

are good friends. As you know, I also have five children. We talk about our families. Amira often cries about Haroun and Karim, the two sons she has lost; and she is frightened for Zaid, the only son she has left. She thinks they might shoot him too one day, just like they shot his brothers."

She also fears that Zaid might break apart inside; after Karim's death, he hardly ate or spoke for weeks and weeks. He is like a different person - melancholic and withdrawn. He used to be such a happy boy; now he hardly ever laughs. At night, he has nightmares and often wakes up screaming and bathed in sweat.

"Zaid may look like a man," Aisha continues, "but in reality he is still a child, and he cannot cope with the loss of his brothers, with fighting in the resistance, and with the suffering of the people of Ramadi. Zaid has known nothing but war and hardship his entire life - the war with Iran until 1988, then the Gulf War in 1991, the economic sanctions and now, since 2003, this war.³⁷ He has seen so many people die, adults and children, because of the war and hunger. He has enjoyed so few carefree moments.

"My little boy Ali, who is four, also knows nothing but war. What will become of him? What if his father, or his brothers and sisters are killed one day by the Americans? Everybody knows that the war will continue in Ramadi. Will Ali run away? Will he become a resistance fighter? What should I tell him if he says he wants to join the fight? Should I say it would be futile? What should we mothers tell our children?"

"Can you not make your American friends understand that they have to stop presenting our children with these horrible alternatives - either to stand by and watch their families being slaughtered or to kill someone themselves? Tell them to end this war, which is killing both their young soldiers and our sons - for no reason at all. We cannot take it anymore. There is hardly a mother in Iraq who is not weeping for her sons, her children. What did we ever do to the Americans?"

Aisha has become pale. Abu Saeed takes her in his arms. "I am not reproaching you," Aisha adds quietly, "perhaps you can help. There must be mothers in your country and in America who understand the mothers of Iraq." Aisha leaves the room in tears.

I need some time to reflect on what Aisha has said, as does Abu Saeed. In silence, we go out into the garden. The boys have started to eat supper. Who knows when they will again see such delicious food.

After supper the men say their night prayers. This time I join them and pray with them - but I say my own prayer. "Allahu Akbar - God is great."

If there is a God, and I firmly believe there is, then he certainly does not distinguish between Muslims, Jews and Christians. I ask Allah-Yahveh-God to help the people of Iraq and to grant them peace. I give thanks that we in the West may live in peace. I really do not know what we did to deserve it. Allahu Akbar!

At one in the morning I lie down on my mattress. I know I shall not sleep well tonight. I shall think of Zaid's brothers Haroun and Karim, but also of the day in April 2007 when Zaid took part in his first attack. I shall think of the many American soldiers who have died in Ramadi and are yet to die in Ramadi, and of the much greater number of Iraqi civilians who have been killed by American soldiers, by Al-Qaeda, and by the death squads of power-hungry politicians - and of those who are yet to be killed; and I shall think of the many wounded, maimed and crippled on both sides.

I am very tired, but also very agitated and tense. I jump at every noise from the street beyond the garden gate.

I have not felt this way since my visits to Afghanistan in the 1980s, when Soviet helicopters circled above us and we had to take cover in ditches or under trees. It also reminded me of Algiers in 1960, when I spent a few days with an Arab family there during the Algerian war of liberation. The sound of a car stopping outside, or loud voices, would make us start and listen closely.

The atmosphere on this night is uncanny, even unnerving. Helicopters fly low over the house again and again as though they are looking for something directly nearby. It takes me a long time to fall asleep. I dream horrible dreams and keep waking up.

It is not yet dawn when Abu Saeed comes to me and says: "We have to leave immediately. Certain groups have decided to pay us a visit today. There are all kinds of wild rumours circulating about you. Too many people have seen you, and the children have been proudly telling the other children in the neighbourhood about the stranger staying with them who speaks English. People in Ramadi have not seen a Westerner without an American escort in years. And there are probably a few foreign Al-Qaeda terrorists here as well. You have to get out at once. Changing locations is not good enough any longer."

Still half asleep, I mumble something about the two more days I am meant to spend in Ramadi. I tell Abu Saeed that I have only seen snap-shots so far; I need to spend much more time here if I am really to understand everything. But Abu Saeed is adamant. The situation is critical. The Americans, Abu Saeed says, have stepped up their patrols because there has been heavy fighting again here in Anbar province. A Chinook helicopter has been shot down between Fallujah and Ramadi, and near Rutba an American patrol hit a mine as it crossed a bridge over the highway. The vehicle was destroyed and

the bridge seriously damaged. U.S. forces across Anbar are on high alert.

While I am still battling sleep, Abu Saeed has a heated conversation on his cell phone. He yells something like *almani*, which means German. I hear the words 'Al-Qaeda' and 'raids' several times. Then Abu Saeed says he is very sorry, but he can no longer take responsibility for my safety.

In a daze, I collect my belongings. Putting my hosts in mortal danger or being seized by the Americans during a raid in Anbar province would not be a good idea. Abu Saeed is right. Nonetheless, I would very much like to stay longer. I still want answers to a thousand questions I have about Iraq.

Abu Saeed repeats in a gruff voice: "We have to go. Immediately. One hour from now, we will not be able to get away. They are sealing the area." I go straight to the car. This morning there is no coffee waiting for me.

Musa has started the engine. Abu Saeed is already in the car. This time, his family is staying at home. Abu Saeed has not had time to organize the departure of his family as well.

As I am about to get in, Zaid appears before me. "I would like to visit you in Germany, when the war is over. May I?" he asks quietly.

"Yes, you may," I answer. I feel very bad about leaving while these people have to remain in all their misery. "Call me if you or your family have any problems because of me. I shall try to help you. I promise." Zaid turns away silently.

I shall never forget this young man, no matter what, or the many tears shed by the people I have met in Ramadi. This damned dishonourable fraudulent war, in which there are only losers. It makes me sick to think that some people in the West still dream and talk of 'victory' in Iraq. I feel ashamed of the indifference with which we in the West watch the Iraqi tragedy unfold. I have rarely experienced such deep shame as I have these days in Ramadi.

I slam the car door shut and look one last time over at Abu Saeed's family sleeping peacefully on the lawn, wrapped in blankets. Then we set off, with Musa driving as fast as the bumpy road permits.

Return to Syria

As always, Musa takes a number of detours to avoid as many checkpoints as possible. It takes half an hour to get out of Al-Jazeera and onto the highway to Damascus. I notice that in the early-morning rush I put on Abu Saeed's sandals. I must have left my trainers - and who knows what else - at his house.

I am about to apologize for being scatterbrained, when Musa suddenly brakes hard. We are just outside Ramadi; three white-and-blue police pickup trucks overtake. Standing on the bed of each truck are one or two masked Iraqi police officers behind a machine gun. The pickup trucks pass us slowly. The masked men peer in through our tinted windows in the pre-dawn gloom. Their machine guns are directed at us.

Though I fear trouble is brewing, I get out my camera. Poor Abu Saeed explodes in rage, and I put it down again next to my seat. The tension in the SUV is almost palpable. Musa, our usually silent driver, also asks me not to take any photos. I nod and pat him on the shoulder. I do not want him to lose his nerve.

Musa has brought our Chevrolet to a halt, to try to maintain the required distance to the police pickups in front of us. But the sinister trucks with their masked gunners stop just 50 meters ahead.

About 200 meters ahead is a large junction. We have no idea what is going on. All we know is that the heavily armed police officers on the pickups have the same rights as American soldiers. That means, they may shoot at once, if for any reason they feel they are under threat.

At the crossroads, four more pickups appear on the left and the right. On each, intimidating figures man a machine gun. And just beyond the junction, coming the other way, two more of these heavily armed trucks take up position. A total of nine pickups are now blocking the highway.

The one immediately in front of us, about 50 meters away, suddenly backs up, its machine gun still pointing our way. My blood freezes in my veins. The pickup stops again just a few meters from our SUV. One of the masked officers yells and waves his arm at us.

Abu Saeed, who is looking very pale, barks at Musa: "Back up! Fast!" Musa slams the car into reverse and floors the gas pedal, putting at least 200 meters between us and them - just to be on the safe side. I think it would very be nice if the machine gun were pointing in a different direction.

Minutes pass. Suddenly we see in the distance beyond the junction a military convoy coming towards us. So that must be the reason why these nine pickups and their machine guns are here to secure the crossroads. We all breathe a sigh of relief

Abu Saeed angrily lectures Musa, telling him that he always has to stop when an armed pickup passes. Especially since an American patrol was blown up on a bridge over this very highway only yesterday. He scolds me as well: I should pack away my damned camera! We are all as white as a sheet - and

not just because of a lack of sleep.

The military supply convoy passes. After half an hour we can resume our journey. Musa floors it, this time in a forward direction. He turns off the air conditioning, explaining that at high speed and with such poor-quality gas the engine would otherwise overheat. Musa wants to get out of his own country as fast as he can.

We still have 450 kilometres to go. The mood in the Chevrolet is still unbearably tense. Bathed in sweat, I stare out at the Iraqi desert littered with burned-out wrecks. How many Iraqis and how many Americans have died on this highway?

Musa again plays his cassette of fiery sermons; Abu Saeed dozes; and I write notes and I empty my first of many bottles of water.

After five and a half hours, at midday, we reach the Iraqi border fortifications. Among the wrecks, a sign in Arabic thanks us for visiting Iraq - shukran liziaratikum. I wonder if my response should be: "The pleasure was all mine."

But I will not be coming back any time soon, at least not until the situation changes. Beyond the first set of checkpoints we again pass through the five-kilometre stretch of no man's land, between high walls, past the Palestinian refugees and their tents. All the misery of the world is to be found here in concentrated form. What will the children growing up in these dirty tents think, when they are adults, of those who drove them out into this place, and of those who would not let them in, and of those who caused this entire catastrophe?

After a few minutes, we see another sign: Ahlan wasaha lan bikom fi Soria - welcome to Syria.

I feel such immense relief. I am out again; it is over. No more armoured Humvees, American armoured personnel carriers, reconnaissance helicopters, or F-16 fighter jets. No more masked Iraqi police officers! No more fear of crazed Christian GIs or crazed Muslim suicide bombers. No more "ceasefire" in a four-kilometre zone in which bomb blasts hurl cars into the air and helicopters are shot out of the sky. What a sense of relief!

Although I could not admit this to myself either before or during my trip, I now acknowledge that Iraq filled me with fear, real visceral fear - for the first time in my life. I spent five days in this tormented country, five very long days. I never would have thought that I could feel such infinite relief upon entering Syria, of all places.

The Syrian border controls are even stricter for those entering from Iraq than for those leaving Syria. We have to see the head of the border police, an

elegant officer of about 40. He thinks Abu Saeed is joking when he says that I am a physician and had been to Ramadi to assess first hand the situation of the people living there. "No German would go there," he retorted with a smile. "No foreigner ever goes there, at least not without an armoured car and armed guard."

When Abu Saeed mentions the ceasefire, the officer cuts him short with a hearty laugh. "Ceasefire? In Anbar province? With how many killed every night? Ten instead of 20? Do you know how many people are killed on the highway between here and Ramadi every week? There were more roadside bomb attacks in July than in any month since the war began!"

Abu Saeed argues passionately. I think he fears the border guards might send me back to Iraq. The officer, who has suave movie-star good looks, still does not believe a word he says. But I really do not look very dangerous or suspicious. Eventually he gives us back our passports and says we may go. Then he picks up his phone.

We go back to our car, where another border official is waiting for us. The officer had evidently just called him. Unfortunately, he tells us, we have to go to the head of customs. Abu Saeed seems to have an inkling of what is going on.

But this junior official will not be deterred by an offer of baksheesh from taking us to the customs post. Abu Saeed's brow is distinctly furrowed. "He is taking us to the head of intelligence. Stick to your story about being a physician, otherwise things could get nasty."

Abu Saeed was right. We are escorted into the small office of the top secret-service man here.

He is wearing a sleeveless undershirt. He is about 35 and he has a receding hairline of dark brown hair. He looks almost European. Abu Saeed tells him that I am a physician and shows him my invitation from the Iraqi interior ministry and our passports; Abu Saeed talks and talks. But the senior spy just laughs.

He does not believe Abu Saeed either. "A German in August in Anbar province?" He has never heard such a silly story. Still, he cannot send us back, and after a while he gives us back our passports.

He has a small request, he adds. One of his men has a bad sore throat. And since I am here, could I not take a look?

My heart sinks - I have been caught out! I gather my wits and decide the best policy will be to say the man must be taken to the hospital immediately, if he really does look sick.

We are taken to another small room, which is both very hot and very drafty. A heavyset Syrian of about 25 with a shaved head enters and points to his throat. I point to his mouth and tell him to open it. He obeys and opens it as wide as it goes. I depress his tongue with a small ruler. His throat is inflamed and covered by white spots. It looks like a straightforward case of strep throat.

I remember my mother's old remedy for sore throats. "Gargle with sea salt every two hours," I tell him. Abu Saeed translates the diagnosis and the prescribed treatment. The official looks at me aghast: "Gargle with what? We do not have any sea salt here."

"If you cannot get any sea salt at the pharmacy," I tell him, "dissolve an aspirin in water and gargle with it before you go to bed. Gargle for a long time, then swallow. That even helps against gingivitis."

The official nods gratefully, even though he does not have gingivitis. My final word of advice is: "And shut the door! Your office is so drafty, anyone would get sick."

The fat Syrian hugs me in gratitude as he says shukran - thank you! Meanwhile, I am thanking my mother in heaven for having had a trusty remedy for all my childhood ailments. "Yallah!" says Abu Saeed, indicating we need to move on. He seems to regret having sold my doctorate in law as a doctorate in medicine.

Hanan

With a renewed sense of relief, we drive on towards Damascus. Nobody is feeling talkative now. Musa has been rather sullen all along. I ask him why he never says anything. He looks straight ahead at the road and remains silent. After a while, he says quietly: "I used to like talking about my life, back then when I was a driver for the police in Baghdad. Then the war came, and all the misery. If I start to talk, it all wells up again."

"I had an aunt in Baghdad, her name was Hanan," Musa tells me. "Her husband died young. She was small but very beautiful. She never remarried, and mourned his death for many years. Eventually she decided to find new meaning in her life. From that day on, she supported the large families of her two younger brothers Salim and Jamil.

"Every morning at six o'clock she got to work washing, ironing and cooking for Salim's family of nine. Everything had to be spotless and tidy. Then in the afternoon she went to Jamil's house, to do the same for his family of 12. She worked non-stop, and hardly ever took a break. Nothing was too much for

her.

"But over the years the hard work wore her down. Her skin became wrinkly and tanned, and she looked like the old women at the market who sell fruit and vegetables. But she was always so full of love that everybody loved her too.

"All she cared about was to help the wives of her brothers and to help make their families happy. In the evenings she would read to the children, and later the grandchildren, or tell them stories of her childhood. She was very happy, because she had not one, but two families.

"One day in fall 2006, Hanan was out shopping for her two families - she was already over 60 and a little frail - when suddenly fighting erupted between Americans and resistance fighters nearby.

"The U.S. soldiers must have called in the helicopters, which then bombed the neighbourhood where Hanan's two brothers lived. "Hanan heard the bombs explode and saw the clouds of smoke, and hurried home as fast as she could. Her bags were heavy, as she had such large families to feed.

"She was already out of breath as she turned into the small road where her brother Salim and his family lived. She saw at once that his house had been completely destroyed. She dropped her bags and ran, screaming, to the site. Neighbours were standing in front of the rubble, distraught and angry.

"Hanan cried out: 'Where is Salim? Where is Zainab? Where are my children?' The neighbours just pointed to the smoking ruins, or turned away in tears.

"My frail aged aunt tried with her bare hands to remove the stones one by one, to dig a hole through the rubble. She wept and cried, and blood poured from her hands. She lay down on the rubble that had buried her beloved children and grandchildren and family. She covered her head in ashes. She wanted to die, just as her family had died.

"After an hour, she got up, collected her bags of shopping, and sat down on a low wall opposite the ruins of the house. She pulled her black veil low over her eyes. She sat there crying and groaning until the evening.

"The neighbours invited her into their homes and to eat with them. But they could not persuade her and gave up. Hanan just wanted to stay there, close to her children, her grandchildren, her family. Somebody had brought her a bottle of water, but she did not touch it.

"At sundown, the neighbourhood imam came to her and asked where she would spend the night. At Jamil's house, she replied in a faint whisper. "The

imam tried to talk with her, but he could not find the words. He turned away helplessly and left, wiping the tears from his eyes. He took a deep breath, clenched his fists, and went back to Hanan. He tried to remain calm as he said: 'You cannot go to Jamil's house, because it too has been destroyed. They are all dead.'

"Hanan, this little old woman bent over in agony, raised herself, slowly pulled her veil up from her eyes and stared at the imam in disbelief. She scrutinized his face as if it might confirm that she had misheard his words. She shook her head in despair: 'No, that cannot be true. It is impossible.

'Tell me it is not so,' she implored. 'Jamil is alive, and I shall go to him, as always. And nobody will stop me.' 'You cannot go to Jamil,' the imam replied softly. 'He is no longer there. They are all dead.'

"With a deep cry, Hanan threw herself on the ground, and clawed at the earth, and beat her fists on the road. She rested her head in the dust and wept. She lay there quite still.

"After an hour or so, the imam and some friends carried her to his house. The imam's wife brushed the dust out of her abaya and tried to clean her face and hands. She brought Hanan something to eat, but Hanan did not touch it. She just sat there sobbing and whimpering.

"Late in the evening relatives came and asked her to come back with them. We also asked her to come to our house - my family and I. Hanan did not respond. She had crumbled, collapsed in upon herself. She remained with the imam's family. She did not eat and she did not drink. She only cried.

"Three days later she died. She simply stopped breathing. She could not bear it any longer, and she did not want to carry on."

Musa is holding the steering wheel very tight and is staring straight ahead. His eyes are dry. "Thousands of families in Iraq could tell you such stories, including people you met in Ramadi. They only told you a small part of what they have been through.

"Tell your American friends that they have not only destroyed our country but also broken our hearts." Musa pauses for a moment. Then he adds quietly: "Hanan was Zaid's favourite aunt."

The outline of Damascus appears in the distance. Musa and Abu Saeed will spend the night in Damascus and head back to Ramadi in the morning - to a country where most of the people have lost everything, including hope.