

Interview with Wisam- Charles Ferguson's driver in Iraq

WISAM: My name is Wisam. I am a driver now...I work for the Washington Post.....before three weeks I used to work as a Caprice driver, I took people from and to Amman-Baghdad. Because of bad security circumstances, I couldn't continue because killing now is because of your ID....so I changed my destination to Basra.

INTERVIEWER: What happened?

WISAM: My friend Abbas was slaughtered in a town called Muhammadiat just to the north of Ramadi. Also Haidar was slaughtered.

INTERVIEWER: Who killed them?

WISAM: People with covered faces killed them because of their IDs.....because his name is Abbas which is a Shiite name and also his tribal name is obviously Shiite. They can know from IDs who is Shiite and who is Sunni.....in Iraq you can know people are Shiite or Sunnis from their tribal name. You read the ID and you can tell, for example most of the names are Ali and Omer. Shiites use Ali and Sunnis use Omer.....but my cousin for example is called Omer, but most known is that Shiite names are Abbas, Sajjad, Hussein and Kadhum these names are from the south and therefore they are Shiite names.

INTERVIEWER: can you tell us the stories of these people?

WISAM: Abbas was slaughtered, they severed his head in Muhammadiyat. They took him out of his car immediately, slaughtered him and took his car. His car is here now. But Abbas's tribe thought he was still alive and asked the help of some Sheikhs in Ramadi to find him. People of Ramadi are not convinced in the rightness of these things, even then they don't know who is doing such things. The killers are unknown, covered faces and no one knows who they are..... Abbas' tribe intervened because they thought that he was alive at that time. They asked sheikhs in Ramadi to search for Abbas. And then they found that he was killed somewhere.....yes they found his body. By searching the area they found his dead body and

gave it to his tribe. This happened before 10 or 11 days. Those (killers) were standing by the side of the road to target and slaughter those who worked with Americans, those who drive foreigners, and those merchants who smuggle their money from here to Amman.

Haidar had a nickname, we call him Haidar TATA. Its because he had worked on a TATA bus under the former regime. His real name was Haidar Ali Abbas. Haidar used to transfer a pot to Amman. By chance—and this is how problem start—the Americans had closed Ramadi's Bridge. We use this bridge to cross to the other side of the river. So, they crossed the bridge and after the bridge there are these farmers standing by the side of the road. So to save time, drivers take a side road to cross through the farms and get back to the highway after the American-blocked piece of the road.....of course they always close the road for an hour or two and some times for a whole day. Usually drivers want to drive as fast as possible because they don't want to drive at night as the road is not safe enough. Haider drove through the farms hoping everything would be fine as his passengers were a Sunni family. A group of masked people stopped him and asked him where he is going. He told them the road was blocked by Americans. So they took him out of the car with the family. It was all ready the afternoon by that time. They were taken to a garage in Ramadi. The Sunni family was Haider's neighbors in an east Baghdad neighborhood. The kidnappers told them they are going to free the family and kill Haider.....the family tried to free Haider but no luck. They took the Caprice back to Baghdad and told Haider's family about what happened. And that they had tried their best to free Haider, and that the kidnappers promised they would free him after interrogating him. They killed Haider and threw his body near the river. His driver friends from Ramadi tried to mediate his release but they found him dead. His body showed torture everywhere. He was shot to death, they were too many bullets in his body. This was months before the events of Samara.

INTERVIEWER: So a Shiite driver can't travel now to Amman?

WISAM: No they can't any more. Drivers who used to take passengers to Amman have changed to Basra. The strange thing is that many other Shiite drivers continued driving to

Amman, one of them Saeed. He was captured in Tribil near Jordan. But he was lucky when he was captured by real Mujahdeen. There are two groups; real Mujahdeen who fight against the Americans and don't care about Shiite or Sunnis, but others are mercenaries who are not really Mujahdeen. They are there to kill; they kill anyone who is Shiite. They also kill Sunnis to steal their cars. They are hired by people from outside Iraq.

For example when we drive out to Amman, the Jordanians check every thing even our stocks. But when we return back from Jordan and enter Iraq, we don't even get a stamp on our passports. We can just drive through because the borders are not well controlled. So anyone- even Israeli, American and even Iranians- can drive into Iraq and do what they want. So Saeed was captured in Trebeel by real Mujahdeen. Saeed had had a passenger with him from the MOH, they had taken blood sacs to the MOH. So in the Trebeel gas station, two cars- an Opel and a white pickup, drove in and asked for the owner of a car and Saeed told them its mine. Saeed's full name is Saeed Kasim. They told him that they want to take him with them. He replied with a question of why, and they told him to check a few things. They checked the blood sacs which were filling the trunk of Saeed's GMC truck. The official of the MOH was with him, but he was freed by the Mujahdeen. They drove Saeed then to Rutba where they interrogated him, then from Rutba they took him to another place. As a professional driver from Amman to Baghdad he was able to tell where he was taken by feeling the distance even though they blindfolded him. He said his captives drove left our of the highway where they arrived to a camp in the middle of the desert in what is known as Al-Jazeera. They took him out and they drove the car away. They said if the blood in the car has AIDS in it that is meant to harm the country we will kill you. If not, they we will free you and until then he had stay with them. For 3 days, Saeed stayed with them. He saw how they were making the IEDs. They were like a military base. They asked him to pray with them, but Saeed told them he don't pray....they replied to him, don't be afraid that you are a Shiite and that we will slay you, and they didn't kill him....he insisted he is not praying. Saeed said all of them were Iraqis. Saeed also said he was eating and

drinking with them. After three days they told Saeed that he should go. They told him they were afraid if Americans came by . They were guarding Saeed for all of these three days. Saeed complained about his car and they told him that they would bring it back to him if they discovered that Saeed was innocent. And that they would kill him if the blood was polluted with AIDS. Saeed insisted he was innocent...

They dropped Saeed on the Highway near the town of the 160 Km. He was lucky when one of his friends was driving back to Baghdad by that area and saw him running, he knew Saeed was missing. He took him and brought him back home he arrived at about 10:00am to 10:30pm. Two days later Saeed received a phone call from his captives telling him that his car is at 160Kms stop. It's a well-known area for drivers to take a rest on the highway. It's about 160Kms northwest to Ramadi. He arrived at the stop where he saw his car parked and intact. There was some money under the driver seat which was still there, they didn't mess his car. But the blood packs weren't in the car.

A man came to him and asked him if it is his car. Saeed said yes and the man gave him the car keys. That person walked away. During this time, an American convoy passed by and had an IED exploded over them. They started shooting everywhere. The man who handed Saeed the keys got injured in his arm. Saeed said he felt he should carry him to a hospital as he gave him back his car. There was chaos at the area and Americans started shooting everywhere, as you all know they do this all the time. Saeed drove him to Rutba Hospital where he stayed for a while and left him afterwards because he was afraid from Americans who could see him and he was still afraid that those are not Mujahdeen so he left him.

Before the Samara bombing, the Mujahdeen were stopping us every now and then on the way to Amman and they'd ask where are you going? We Say Amman. They ask who are those people with you? We say Iraqis. They never asked if they were Sunnis or Shiites, we just say Iraqis. They check the car to see if we are smuggling something or an American or a foreigner. If we do have a foreigner, they take him and warn us don't do that, so, now, we never took any

foreigners on that road because in Trebeel they know every one in our car. So this is why the drivers suffer on the road to Trebeel.

They now say if a Shiite goes to Fallujah he will be slain. If a Sunni goes to the South he will be killed. They say this, but did they capture someone who did this? All we see on TV are fighters from Jihad and Tawheed (old name for Qaeda in Iraq) or Mahdi Army, but now one told us who are these people relating to, where they are taking their orders from. Is it possible that the American Intelligence, the police or the National Guards can't bring in one of these people? If America was able to take Iraq in a night and one day with its warplanes-they destroyed a whole country even people can't drive or walk in the streets- can't they arrest those few people who are doing these sectarian things? It's a hidden matter.

In reality most of my friends are Sunnis. And if I have a Sunni friend and someone assaulted him I would immediately attack that person without asking him whether he is a Sunni or a Shiite. I don't care about his background I would only care about my friend.

This sectarian plot is a new thing, it was available under Saddam but not with slaughtering. We were only using it to distinguish each other. For example, if this man is from the south is a Shiite, if he is from Ramadi he is Sunni. Moreover we are intermarried- we are married to each other. If there is sectarian problems between us we wouldn't have married each others from the beginning.

When I went to marry, they didn't ask me whether I am a Shiite or a Sunni. They didn't ask me. They only cared about my family and ethics- that's the most important. Now, I don't know. In these circumstances my brother engaged a Zubaie tribe girl, [*Zubae: is a hardline Sunni tribe lives in and around Fallujah, many of them engaged in the insurgency from the very beginning against the Americans. They fought against the Americans in two wars in Fallujah in 2004*], they came and asked about us in the area and they were told we are good people but at the same time poor people and they agreed.

INTERVIEWER: Don't you think there is a civil war among Iraqis now?

WISAM: There is no such thing in Iraq. I am not a well educated man. I hardly finished the second grade in Junior High. However I can simply identify the situation in Iraq to you in two words; that there is there is a civil war among the parties. It's all because of political gains and money. There is an Egyptian proverb that says "he hit me and complained and overtook me by his weeping". They are doing these killings and they are the people who are complaining.

The problem is not only Saddam or one person. Saddam had made too many mistakes, but he also had some advantages under his regime. One of his advantages is security, we were able to drive at night- you could go to Amman at night. You could drive to Basra or Ramadi at night. But his mistakes were like too many wars, the people living were not good and the Army was recruiting every young man and old man. His second mistake was that you couldn't talk under his regime.

INTERVIEWER: Who is responsible for the civil war in your opinion? Is it Bremer?

WISAM: Yes, it is Bremer. I am not a politician, but Bremer brought these people in the Governing Council. They were like running a loan, every month one of the heads of the council. Did he ask to give it to political people? No, he said Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis will hold the council- this is sectarian partnering. That was the beginning of the civil war which was inside the Green Zone. But it's like an epidemic. If you can't control it, it will spread. So this epidemic started in the Green Zone, as they fought for the chairs-- not for our sake but for their sake. I don't believe they have any political thinking, I don't think they were politicians either.

WISAM: We were hopeful when America came, they will remove Saddam, they will bring us freedom, then what? No security and no jobs. There is a poem I heard recently that says: "no oil, no gas, how? Should we electrify eggs to fry it or should we heat the tea by a lighter?"

Its funny but frankly there is nothing in Iraq that's a reality.

WISAM: In reality- yes, there is such thing; Sunnis are killed and Shiites are killed, but who is killing them? Who is he? Where is he? We don't know.....myself, if I know him I would

have killed him....its just like Santa Claus, no one knows who he is, but its just a lie to convince kids about Christmas. We don't know who is doing these killings.

INTERVIEWER: What happened in al-Shuruffi mosque?

WISAM: Before the explosion they caught an old woman who entered the mosque for unknown reasons. When she entered the mosque there were women to check women and men to check men entering the mosque. When they checked her they found that she was wearing a belt. When they asked her about it she said this is for my back pain. When they opened it they found that it is an explosive belt. When they asked her again she said that this is her belt and that she uses it usually for her back pain. Her words revealed that she knew nothing about the explosives. So they asked her who gave you this belt, and she said her son gave her this belt.

And he (her son) told her that whenever she enters this mosque she should press this button when he tells her that. So her son was intending to explode his mother in the mosque. Her son!

Every one in the area heard about this accident and we all went there. The woman was there, and she was crying not because she was afraid but because her son did this to her. Her son disappeared.

WISAM: I wish that the government would negotiate with these real Mujahdeen who fought against thieves. As you might remember- early after the invasion they killed some thieves and hanged them on a bridge and some drivers saw. The government should support these Mujahdeen and negotiate with them. The government should tell them we respect your opinion that you don't want an occupier in the country. The government side sees that the occupier would leave by politics, but the Mujahdeen sees that the occupier would never leave by politics.

Opinion is right, because if he did not occupy your land he would occupy you intellectually. And this is what is going on now- every thing in our intellect is changing. And day after day it's getting worse.

For example, the early days when a car bomb targets a Husseinya or a mosque, Shiites were not saying those are Sunnis but they say Zarqawi people. Isn't that right?

Now its changed. Then they started hitting hard, with more evidences. So they targeted Ali Al-Hadi Shrine in Samara. If you are not a Muslim at least you would respect them as they were the sons of the prophet. If not then you would sacred the place for being a relic.

The people of Samara used to love Ali Al-Hadi shrine even though they are Sunnis. You won't imagine that these people who used to swear in the Shrine's name would harm the Shrine. Moreover, they know its importance for their living from the pilgrims who used to come to the Shrine every now and then. I am sure the people of Samara who are Sunnis would've never harmed the Shrine