

André Brie, Trip to Iraq from 2-10 January, 2007

Abdullah, Samira, Asaad – Weapons from the US Army and European Arrogance

January 2, 7 a.m.

I sit in the airplane to Paris and, as always on such trips, want to start my diary. This time it comes hard to me, very hard. For the last three or four days, I have had to force myself to be happy and attentive. Unfortunately, right during our dancing on New Year's Eve, I finally confessed to Ingrid how I really feel. It is my eighth visit to Iraq. Yet this time, my courage has left me, or maybe not my courage, but my peace of mind, since we are also travelling to the danger spot of Diyala province and still hold on to the plan to get through to Baghdad. Two days ago, Saddam Hussein has been executed in a despicable performance. Yet anyhow the situation was getting worse and worse. Of course, I can tell myself: Man, don't play sentimental, don't act up. I know that Abdullah Aljubori whom I know since 2003 will do everything for our safety, that we will be in the best of hands. My feelings, however, don't listen to my head. And the idea that I am losing a week of vacation, one of the few holiday weeks anyhow together with Ingrid and Saira, troubles me in addition.

Yet, my Portuguese colleague, Paulo Casaca and I did not find another time. We could not mind Saddam's execution anyhow when we were looking for flights and conversation partners. I rather not write too much about my state of mind. This must seem embarrassing to outsiders. However, my notes will lose their meaning if I limit myself to the outward appearances.

I leave home at 4 a.m., The Christmas lights in the trees of the front gardens still accompany me for a couple of minutes. Only the house of my friend Jürgen lies strangely and sadly in the dark, ever since he died so horribly surprisingly a couple of weeks ago.

In Paris, I shall have to sit around for 5 hours on the airport. When I returned a year ago from Iraq, I could read in a paper that I (and others) were at home more on the large international airports than among the people and no longer knew who had elected them. Even in the ND, while there are excellent journalists, the old way not to deal openly with unwelcome political opinions, but rather to destroy the political integrity of those one does not like, flares up again and again. With that you have to live in the PDS. Against Ronald Weckesser, Christine Ostrowski, Ingrid and others, an aggressive procedure of exclusion is underway at present, the first collective such proceeding since SED times, and the Saxonian Arbitrage Commission has just documented its whole complete disdain for the concerned by not even keeping to the most primitive forms of the procedure for them. Some, I fear, maybe want the party unification to be preceded by a party cleansing. History that one does not deal with catches up with you again and again, and above all hinders the ever again necessary contemporary political decisions. Yet, also in this case it holds, what used to be a tragedy, is now a farce. Arbitrage commissions play party control commission and do not even notice that their time lies a whole age back. Ingrid experiences it differently of course. For her, the things that she experienced in 1987 are repeating themselves quite directly. Yet I manage to calm her down. This time, nobody will have the power to send her for rehabilitation into the brown coal works.

Well then, to Paris, so that the PAPER may see its judgement confirmed!

Ten thirty

I no longer feel anything of my depression in the morning. When, one and a half hours ago, I strolled through the dreary waiting hall, I suddenly saw Abdullah Aljubori. I was immediately happy, and he also greeted me in an incredibly heart-felt way. We remembered our last accidental meeting at the Baghdad airport one and a half years ago. Now, I not only know, I feel that the trip will be organised in a good and responsible way. He told that from Erbil

onward, 16 armed men of his bodyguards will accompany us. But from Abdullah himself there already emanates a feeling of security, a sovereignty that is hard to explain. He has survived 14 attempts since 2003. His brother has been brutally slaughtered by a death squadron (he was trailed along on the ground by a car until he died), one of his nephews, who belonged to his bodyguards, was killed. In 2006, Abdullah was arrested without cause, yet, his courage does not even seem to be scratched, his commitment to his country neither. In 1990, he emigrated to Great Britain to be a dentist; in 2003, he returned to Iraq, became mayor of Mughdadia, then governor of the province of Diyala. I for one, have more than once experienced the reverence he enjoyed in Diyala. At the elections in 2005, his name was struck from the electoral bulletins. His objections to the Central Electoral Commission and at the Superior Court remained without result: Just because of a mistake at the provincial level, one could impossibly repeat the whole election. Since then, Diyala has been ruled by a Shiite follower of the fundamentalist militias completely discredited among the population.

Abdullah might spend his life prosperously and quietly in London, but precisely that he can't do. He does not resign, cannot give up. He spreads a happy energy. Like a machine, I think, and correct myself immediately. Simply a wonderful, warm-hearted and trustworthy person. Allah, he tells me, knows what I do for the people at home, for all together and for many individuals. He will protect me. I am not capable of such faith, but his happy confidence immediately infects me. I tell him about Saira, show him a photo, and we discover a communality that brings us even closer to one another: He has a three-year-old daughter, also a cherished latecomer.

January 3, 10 o'clock, in the hotel in Erbil

After a trip of around twenty-four hours we land in Erbil at four o'clock in the morning. During the trip into the city, I can also see in the sparse light of the few lanterns how much new has been built already again in the past eleven months in Erbil. At 5 o'clock we are in the hotel and still able to rest for 3 or 4 hours. On the shadowy areas of the meadows, there still lies white frost, but the morning is spring-like and sonny. Our working schedule will begin at 12 o'clock. I read in two English-language Kurd newspapers and in the diary of Mihail Sebastian that captures me from the very first pages on. Following Abdullah's request, we have abandoned our plan to travel to Baghdad. The US armed forces are not able to put a helicopter at our disposal; the overland road would be much too dangerous. Moreover, here we are agreed, a meeting with prime minister Maliki following Saddam's execution would be an irresponsible signal.

12 o'clock

In the hotel, where I also stayed in 2006, we meet with the governor of the province, Nawzad Hadi Mawlood and the higher education minister of the Kurd regional government, Dr. Idris Hadi Salih. Abdullah apparently knows them both well.

Kurdistan is not an oasis, but the situation is infinitely better than in other parts of Iraq. 60000 women and men students, more and more of them also from the Arabic provinces, study at present at the five state and two private universities, three technical colleges and fifteen specialised institutes in Kurdistan. Half of them are girls, the minister answers to my question. "In Baghdad, there are much fewer, and in the meantime almost all of them are veiled there. Muktadar al Sadr (one of the militia leaders; A.B.) turns every university into a Mosque. Here with us, on the contrary, women are free like in Europe." This may be true for the universities, I think. Otherwise, I know from earlier visits, women especially in the rural Kurd areas continue to have very, very great problems.

Our discussion quickly becomes concrete and practical, there comes up for that last but not least Tomaz Dentinho, a Portuguese professor of the University of the Azores, who accompanies Paulo, Abdullah and me: possibilities for cooperation with European Universities, stipends for Iraqi students in Europe, professional training of university lecturers. For twenty years, Iraq has been internationally isolated. The formerly progressive educational system has been destroyed. Kurdistan maybe enjoyed a factual independence

since 1992; however, it suffered from the UN embargo against Iraq and from Saddam Hussein's embargo against the Kurd region. Electricity supply is still bad also in Kurdistan. Only for three to four hours a day does the electricity come from the central network; for the rest of time, there run the generators of the hotels, administrative agencies, hospitals. Most private households do not have such possibilities. The disappointment about the lack of presence and activities of the European Union is great. Ours as well. I tell of my up to now fruitless efforts to get the EU Commission to at least help the survivors of the poisonous gas attack of Halabya. In the Commission, they fear, however, that projects in Kurdistan could be understood by the Iraqi central government or also by Turkey as contribution to Kurd independence. The minister reacts immediately: "We do not want a division of Iraq. Our future lies in this country. We are ready to cooperate with Baghdad on all our projects." Yes. That is precisely what I have told to the EU foreign commissioner a couple of weeks ago. It has not helped so far.

If course, we also discuss the execution of Saddam Hussein. One of the advisors of the minister (all men, whom we meet today, live in Great Britain), Dr. Amin Barzanyi, underlines: "We Kurds want to look into the future. We have witnessed brutal oppression. The war damages are great. The mountainous forests were cut down, and even these days the trees in the streets are often cut down by the inhabitants of the cities, because they don't have fuel for their heating and cooking ovens. The water conducts are worn out, dirt is rampant; in many places, there is no waste pick-up. Yet we Kurds do not want revenge. Our culture also prevents us from celebrating the execution of Saddam." The governor of Erbil adds: "We hardly understand the USA. Maybe they handed over Saddam so quickly to Maliki, so that the criticism will no longer be addressed to them, but to the government and the Sadr militias. Saddam bears the responsibility for one million dead in Iraq, but the present situation does not differ substantially from that. Moreover, one would have had to investigate all Saddam's crimes before court and judge them, for instance, the poisonous gas attack against Halabya, the annihilation and expulsion of the Marsh Arabs in the South, the murder of his own relatives in Tikrit and the wars against Iran and Kuwait."

About 7 p.m.

I use a brief break to update my notes to the most recent state. After the two and a half hour discussion at lunch time, we drive to a new shopping centre "New City" that might also be located in the centres of European cities.

A giant "Merry Christmas" and an unusually tacky Christmas tiger greet the women and men shoppers that can only be part of the fast-growing upper strata of the city. That's more than nothing, I think, let us imagine in Germany the department stores would decorate for the Muslim holidays. You can get many prejudices confirmed in Iraq, many more of them disproved. In the upper floors of the building is a restaurant, where the minister invites us together with a few colleagues. I see quite a few women who eat here also without male accompaniment, some of them veiled, most of them dressed in European fashion. Well, and our table fills up quickly with the wonderful salads, aubergine crême, the flat bread that I love so much, grilled tomatoes, paprika, fresh pepperoni, sour vegetables, rice, kebab, grilled chicken, lamb and very sweet flaky pastry with honey and pistachio. After the night-time flight and the skipped breakfast, I am more or less able to enjoy at least part of this abundance. The conversations continue and land ever again at Saddam's execution; I remember the opinion of a banker who studied in Poland, England and France: "Saddam had to be condemned for his crimes. Most Kurds also believe the death sentence to be right. Yet nobody should have celebrated the execution. That divides our country even more, especially at the cultural level, into the secular and the fundamentalist forces, into those oriented towards the future, and those who have nothing in mind but revenge and separatism."

I have to think of the SMS that my former intern Stella sent me before my departure, and an E-Mail from Simone Oldenburg, a teacher. I myself was shocked maybe, but in contrast

to the two I had not thought of the possible consequences of the execution. Obviously, they were right.

After the meal, I was granted a great wish. Neither in 2005, nor in 2006 had I been able to see the old city within the fortress. Erbil has existed for about 6000 years and is the oldest continuously settled city of the world. In the old times, it was called Urbilum. I guess that the Latin and English "urban" have their roots here. The Kurds call it Hawler, which means "here". Many civilisations have settled in the course of the centuries in Erbil. 2000 years before the beginning of our time count, it was mentioned for the first time by a Sumerian king. For 2350 years, there is supposed to have existed a Kurd pale in the region, we are told by the responsible for the restoration of the citadel encompassing 110000 square meters and of the old city. The last 820 families were relocated recently and received other living space in the city in order to be able to begin the work and be able to conclude it within 10 years. Then they and others are supposed to have the possibility to return, so that the fortress will not only receive a museum-type character, but one that can be used in a lively and modern way. At this point, the situation is rather more dismal. Most buildings are falling apart, the streets are full of ruins, but everywhere we can see charming details of traditional Ottoman houses. The really old layers of settlement will, however, remain forever covered under the constructions of the more recent centuries.

Shortly before midnight

What needs to be filled in are meetings that we had at half past 7 with councillors of the planning and the higher education ministry and our late dinner with Abdullah Aljaburi at which we three Europeans pestered him with our questions and his answers made me conclude: "I always knew how complicated it is to understand the situation in Iraq, but now I will be even more cautious in my judgements." It was a matter of the religious composition of the Iraqi population, and the usual assertion that sixty percent are Shiite. Apart from the fact that Abdullah thought that previously such differences had at least not provoked any violent and hateful confrontations, he drew the numbers considerably into doubt. At most two fifth of the Iraqis belonged to the Shiite current of the faith. The high results of the Shiite parties had only come about due to the massive pressure of the militias in the South. He explained to us in detail how it looked in families, when spouses belonged to different directions, but I was much, much too tired to be able to follow attentively and to take notes. However, now I know that the prayer stone that I once received as a gift is a Shiite one, because Sunnites don't use it.

February 4, in the morning

Again I skip breakfast. Today we shall travel to Diyala. That means it will be over with comfort and security. Since yesterday, the first men of Abdullah's escort are there, and are already getting us somewhat nervous with their frantic preparations. I still pace up and down a little bit before the hotel; taking a walk is impossible or only possible with great difficulty without attracting attention and caring excitement, since the hotel (like all public buildings in Erbil since the bomb attacks two years ago) is barricaded all around by walls and is guarded by a police guard. The sun today has to squeeze through a couple of clouds, but it manages to do so. Nevertheless, it is cool, certainly not more than two, three degrees above zero. My mobile phone does not function, but on the Arabic keyboard of the hotel computer, I have been able to send Ingrid a brief message: I am in good spirits, the trip is worth it, don't worry! (Of course, I was more emotional, more elaborate, be it that for that reason I also made many more mistakes, since I often enough did not find the correct Latin keys.) From now on, for the next couple of days, this chance for communication will now also no longer exist.

Half past ten

With Dr. M. Amin Barzanyi I discuss for one hour three concrete proposals for a cooperation of Iraqi and Iraqi-Kurd universities and German universities and other academic institutions: German instruction, cooperation in administrative matters, stipends for medical students. It will be a lot of work to get at least a part of that on the way. In the final analysis, I shall only

be able to go on a kind of begging round at universities, ministries and the German Academic Exchange Board. Yet, there finally must be practical aid, and much more concrete than the financial help of the EU and the European countries to the UN organisations active in Iraq. How often did I listen in the past couple of years and this time around as well to the hope that “the Europeans” should commit in a more independent and visible way in Iraq and in the Kurd region. No one has to convince me of this, but at home I have not had any success with such ideas. Some don’t want to cross the United States, the others fear the insecurity in the country, yet others that projects in the Kurd part might be understood as a contribution to the disintegration of Iraq. Many women and men Kurds in fact dream of their own state, but the politically responsible among them also know the dangers and stress ever again that they want to make their own contribution to a sound Iraq with an autonomous Kurdistan as its part. The security and the positive economic development in the three Kurd provinces in my opinion could be used for European projects that strengthen the inter-Iraqi cooperation. Maybe I will achieve more this time in the EU and in Germany than a year ago. It does not really encourage me, however, that my Irish colleague Simon Coveney, with whom in February 2006, I have been in Halabya among other places, and I still could not get the authorities to help the victims of the poisonous gas attacks of 1988. I mention this experience in all conversations with Kurd politicians in order to attract their attention to the problems. Very few days after our visit at the memorial site of Halabya, in March 2006, it was burnt down by the inhabitants of the city. It was no memorial site for the victims, but for the poverty of the people. After all what I have seen, heard and experienced there, I understand the indignation. Back then U.S. foreign minister, Colin Powell, visited Halabya for the opening of the memorial; other international politicians have visited it again and again. It is – rightfully so – an important place to point out the terrible crimes of Saddam Hussein. Yet how dishonest must these visits appear to the people concerned, given that up to this day, Halabya is not a place of medical and social help by the international community or be it only of thorough examination of the long-term health and environmental consequences. For several times, I have also gotten to hear since yesterday that the execution of Saddam before the end of the court investigation of the chemical bombardment of Kurds is considered an attempt not to elucidate this crime in a court.

11 o’clock in the Kurd Parliament

I can well remember this ugly building from Saddam times, precisely because its uncouth, fortress-like architecture is so repulsive. Especially for us, it has been opened despite the Islamic holidays, yet empty except for a few security guards. We talk to the vice-president of the Kurd regional parliament, Muhamed K. Salehi (Dr. Kamal Kirkuki figures as the second name variant on his business card, and I first have to get acquainted with the significance of these differences; it disturbs me ever again how little I know about other cultures.) The office appears empty, not only, because little light gets in through the small windows, but because it is crammed with black furniture. The glimpse of light is Kirkuki’s young, self-assertive colleague with blond-coloured hair and fluent in English who not infrequently interrupts her somewhat introverted, stand-offish and very reflective boss. Kurdistan, this one notices even more so on such occasions, is another society than the rest of Iraq. Paulo and I tell of our motives for our visit and our impressions, of the initiative for dialogue “Iraq with a future” and the plans for a European-Iraqi cooperation that is supposed to use Kurdistan’s positive chance. Dr. Kamal Kirkuki speaks a little bit of German that he has learnt as an émigré, I think, in Vienna, for the rest, our conversation is translated from the Kurd into the English: “We must develop our democracy; people have to learn to trust themselves and themselves assume responsibility. That is the most difficult after so many years of dictatorship and of social and mental destructions. We want to build up our region in common with the Arabs, Turks, Assyrians and Christians. The terrible past has not caused us to hate the Arabs; we want to look ahead into the future in common and openly. There are many problems with the central government, but we do not want to solve them in conflict, but by way of negotiations. Up to now, we receive, for instance, much less money by Baghdad than we deserve according to the constitution.” When he talks about the difference in Iraq, Kamal Kirkuki is general above all means: “No religion is better than the other, and no nation. We want a

secure Erbil just as a secure Faludya; and we like Baghdad as the capital just as much as we like Erbil.” Sharply and suddenly with a lot of temper, he criticises the Baker-Hamilton report, the concept for a new security strategy in Iraq and similar ideas of the International Crisis Group (ICG). Especially the proposals to limit the autonomy of Kurdistan and to postpone or not to hold the referendum about the future of Kirkuk foreseen in the constitution for 2007, have gotten Kurd politicians up in arms during the last couple of weeks: “We won’t admit the breach of the constitution by foreign powers.” These plans would destroy the peace also in the South and in the North of Iraq: then Falludja would not become as safe as Erbil, Erbil would become as insecure as Faludja. Baker and Hamilton as well as the ICG did not even come to Kurdistan. Saddam had the pipeline in the North rather constructed 200 kilometres longer, so that it does not lead through our region. The American strategists make the same turn around us. This while they might just as well run in shorts through the city here. In Falludjah, they could dress like Arabs and would still be killed. Not even during their visit in the Baghdad Green Zone did they consult with Kurd politicians.” When we ask him as well about Saddam’s execution, he answers literally: “Saddam was a second Hitler, at another time, in another place. He did not only kill Kurds, also Shiite and Sunnite Arabs, even his own family. He was a threat to Iraq, to the neighbouring countries and to the world. Therefore, we were in favour of the American invasion. Yet the way he was executed, we refuse. It has nurtured grave doubts about the independence of Iraqi courts.” I would have liked to pursue this conversation, talked about our rejection of the death penalty in principle and about the questionable Hitler comparisons that are cultivated on the Left just as much as among other political forces. Saddam was a bloody dictator. His first victims were the Iraqi Communists that he killed in a brutal manner, without the Communist movement, back then ever so strong, even crying out and demonstrating its solidarity with the own women and men comrades. This and every other kind of cruelty can be castigated with all due severity without any equation with Hitler and German National Socialism. However, the talk was over, and I fear that for Kurd politicians, such a continuation would have been a rather academic debate.

2: 45 p.m.

We sit in the cars that will bring us to Diyala that will bring us to Diyala; however, we still have to our luggage. Four Chevrolet jeeps are ready, sixteen well-armed men protected by gun-proof vests join us; four of them have taken seats in the car before and in back of me. At my feet on the floor of the car, there also lies a Kalashnikov. I hope it is not meant for me. At half past one, we still had lunch at the university with the dean, the Kurd minister of higher education, the governor and a couple of professors. They think we are crazy to be driving to Diyala. At least we should have grown a moustache ahead of time. In my case, even that would have been futile, they say. I looked much too European. These are the remarks that I just needed. The dean of the dentistry faculty comes to me one more time: “Do you really want to leave? Which way will you take, hopefully a safe one?” I shrug my shoulder, smile (I think) and say: “Of course.” No, I don’t want to go backward, and everything that could be done for our safety has been done. Moreover, nobody but we and Abdullah’s bodyguards know of the trip, the route and of the mere fact that three Europeans are on the road.

We drive out of Erbil, past the airport and in direction of the South. For half an hour still, we shall be on Kurd territory. The country is flat and dry. Only in the distance can we see the hazy silhouettes of low mountains. On some very few fields, thin green corn is already germinating. The street is densely travelled: private cars, many small transporters, trucks. Nevertheless, we advance quickly, and the contours of the range of hills show more clearly in the sun shining into our faces like a dark green shadow. The landscape remains uninteresting. It seems to have no ideas; I have no ideas for describing it except for its dry and stony brown. Also behind the round, loamy hills it does not look any different, except that now a few rare grey ragged eucalyptus trees, barren limes and willows on a tributary of the Tigris create a modest change. The road has become a rotting highway full of potholes. I guess that we will soon arrive in Kirkuk. As already so often, the pictures before my eyes come in conflict with the Iraq images in my mind: Every kind of life continues in this deadly country. Children play soccer on a piece of land cleared of stones, others play volley-ball.

Peasants peacefully plough their acres. Herdsmen drive sheep and goats over the withered winter grass. Tradesmen have stapled mountains of cabbage on the side of the road. Women hang up laundry to dry in the courtyards. Bricklayers are plastering a new house. In front of a bistro, men sit under a tarpaulin over tea or coffee and look idly on the road. Only the countless road blocks with their machine guns, tanks, soldiers and policemen every three or seven minutes destroy the poor idyll. It is probably as paradoxical as it is: Probably only someone, who does not live here constantly, during such a trip can get rid of the thoughts of the daily attempts, murders, bomb explosions in Iraq as little as I can (and yet more so than those who have never been here and have to take their whole picture of Iraq from the European media).

Still in the barren steppe before Kirkuk, the traffic begins to bottle up in five lines, a sure sign for a particularly large and thorough check point. Even through the closed windows, it smells foul, oily. A few kilometres after my nose, my eyes as well notice the oil towers and gas torches by the roadside. Then we are in an ugly grey desert of houses through which there run streets and small lanes full of rubbish. That then is the much coveted, disputed and fought for Kirkuk. On a crossroads, there is the concrete block with a half-destroyed Saddam picture as thousands of them used to stand all over the country. It is obviously not worth anyone's while to do away with it completely or to make it completely unrecognisable. Kirkuk has other problems.

After a quarter of an hour we are out of the city again. Again the towers with the oil pumps accompany us. The penetrating filling station smell could also be smelled in the city. Yet the real filling stations are closed. Hundreds of vehicles wait in front of the chain in the expectation that at some time, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, gas will be delivered. We drive through the desert. Along towards us comes a column of the US army. The machine guns on the tanks are aimed in a threatening way towards the right and left into the terrain. The terrain on the left (seen from their point of view), that's us.

It has become a quarter past six. There is very little to see, and it is already becoming somewhat dark. The countless military and police posts, or whoever it is who controls the streets also do not provide any change any longer. I read for a while still in Mihael Sebastian's 1935-1944.

7 p.m.

It is dark. There is no longer any chance to read, and whether I shall later on be able to read the notes that I scribble by feel onto the paper, I will know at the earliest tomorrow. We have been driving for more than two hours through the stony brown desert. In the beginning, I was still able to see dried out river beds that will certainly carry water at the earliest when the snow melts. Seldom the lonesome lights of a village or the miserable lamp of an isolated farm appear in the dark. Actually, we had wanted to avoid a drive in the dark, but we started much too late from Erbil. Now only military vehicles are still on the road. We cautiously approach every check point showing in our headlights. I have no idea about the variety of uniforms in Iraq. Yet that Palestine scarves and sneakers are part of it, I do not believe, however, and also our guards often seem to be suspecting something.

Just a moment ago, it is half past seven, something happened. Even if I can't interpret any of that, and moreover, we are already underway again. At one of control points, two warning shots are fired directly before our car. I can only see the fire in the muzzle and hear the bang. I am not startled, but the feeling of helplessness is even greater. I am sitting in a car that I could not get out of, with four armed men in whom I have great confidence, with whom I cannot communicate though, and of whom I cannot imagine, in spite of their Kalashnikovs, what they might be able to do: Outside, hardly anything can be seen. We on the other hand are a well-lighted, so to say ideal target. But maybe I can't evaluate the situation, and my boys dropped altogether silent again as well after a brief exchange of words in Arabic. Shortly afterwards, I see American soldiers who search the roadsides with searchlights and

metal detectors. For Iraq that is no solution, I am convinced of that, for me in these minutes, however, it is. That is an absurd situation.

(To be continued.)