

Expat returns home to help rebuild Iraq *Sami Rasouli and his colleagues strive to maintain peace between Iraqis* By Maysam Zaaroura Daily Star staff Thursday, August 04, 2005

Interview

This is the first in a series of interviews with the Arab delegation to the New York conference created to combat and prevent armed conflict.

Note

On Tuesday, August 09, 2005, the Daily Star printed the following correction:

In the interview titled "Expat returns home to help rebuild Iraq" dated Thursday, August 04, 2005, by Maysam Zaaroura, it was stated that Sami Rasouli said: "There are insurgents, who cross the border from Syria, who hate the U. S. and want to get even." Mr. Rasouli would like to clarify that he did not mean specifically from Syria, as "the country of Iraq borders on six other countries and only the insurgents themselves know how they get into Iraq. While I believe that Iraq's borders have not been secure since the U.S. occupation, it's doubtful that anyone can determine just where insurgents are crossing.

NEW YORK: As a child, Sami Rasouli used to dream of flying over Iraq's borders on something akin to Sinbad's magic carpet, leaving behind what he had known his entire life to explore other cultures and worlds. Some 27 years after accomplishing his dream of leaving Iraq, Rasouli has now come back - working with a non-governmental organization to help his war-torn homeland through its most difficult time.

Rasouli returned to the Iraqi city of Najaf two months after the death of his mother. He couldn't attend her funeral because the coalition's war against terror in the country had made travel at that time impossible.

Then the owner of a restaurant aptly named "Sinbad" in Minnesota, Rasouli - who had been born in the ancient Islamic city of Karbala - was "devastated by the amount of destruction" caused to his country.

"When I returned to the U.S., I suffered from psychological difficulties," he said. "I couldn't sleep at all and I couldn't erase the images from my mind. I felt guilty for leaving all those years ago. I asked myself, why did I leave for so many years?"

The answer to that question is shared by many Iraqis who fled the regime of Saddam Hussein.

"I left because of my love for democracy and freedom," Rasouli explained. "But what is happening now is not democracy or freedom."

So Rasouli sold his restaurant and went "home to rebuild Iraq with the help of the men and women of my country."

"When I arrived, I joined the Iraqi Human Rights Watch in Karbala. After a few days of being there I got the chance to meet the Christian Peacemakers Team in Iraq," the Shiite Muslim said.

"This is an organization of very real people building peace and helping wounded Iraqis. They travel around the world promoting nonviolent action, and I learned from their experiences."

"We asked them to train some of the Muslim men and women in the organization to be peacemakers, so we can work with them, and after five intensive days, 15 of us became peacemakers."

But rather than just trying to keep peace between the Iraqis and the coalition forces, the main aim of Rasouli and his colleagues actually became maintaining peace between the Iraqis themselves.

The greatest threat, according to Rasouli, is the threat of civil war between the Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds - "something," he says "[that] is exactly what the invading U.S. forces would love to see." There are certain groups who are working toward that, he added.

"There are four groups that have emerged following the coalition's invasion of Iraq, groups which we did not use to have in the country, trying to instigate violence," Rasouli said.

For example, there are "the Iraqi nationalists, who target coalition occupying forces in remote areas, in military bases or convoys without inflicting any Iraqi casualties. There are the insurgents, who cross the border from Syria, who hate the U.S. and want to get even. They are the ones who don't care about Iraqi lives."

"Then there are the organized units that kidnap members of rich Iraqi families for ransom."

But the last and most dangerous group, according to Rasouli, is the "intelligentsia."

"Foreign groups like the Mossad and U.S. intelligence that target Iraqi 'brains' - intellectuals, scientists, scholars - and instigate animosity between the Shiites and the Sunnis to initiate war. They're the ones who burn churches and mosques," he said.

But as he sits in one of the many rooms of the UN building at this global conference, Rasouli isn't bitter. He is optimistic. He has high hopes the civil society organizations gathered at the conference will come up with resolutions and take action rather than simply discuss the issue of conflict resolution over and over.

"We need to put civil society members on the ground. They need to physically experience conflict resolution and come back and tell us their stories."

Rasouli is one such peacekeeper. He traveled to Fallujah on May 6, 2004, "where 30,000 homes were damaged, 5,000 were completely destroyed, 50 mosques were burned, 10,000-15,000 people were killed and countless injured and detained."

He said: "The Fallujans were asking, 'why?' One civic leader said 'in 1920 the FBI chased Al Capone through the streets of Chicago and they got him, with all his mobsters, without

destroying any of the city. But to catch Zarqawi and his men, the U.S. has destroyed ... our city. Why?"

Rasouli and his colleagues did not have the answers, but they had the 'symbolic solution' of cleaning up the city. They walked the streets removing the garbage and debris as best they could.

He added: "It was a symbolic way to clean up their lives. Clean up the mess left behind by the U.S. But I think we should have started the cleanup at the White House."

Sami Rasouli is a member of the Middle East delegation at the Global Conference for the Prevention of Armed Conflict and is a member of the Iraqi Human Rights Watch in Karbala, Iraq.