

Military Resistance 10F10



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“These Mountains Are Where Forces Carried Out Operation Anaconda In March 2002 To Rout Fighters From Remote Valleys”

“Ten Years Later, Insurgents Are Still Coming Down Out Of The Mountains”

June 9, 2012 By GRAHAM BOWLEY, New York Times [Excerpts]

COMBAT OUTPOST RAHMAN KHEL, Afghanistan — Lt. Col. Shawn Daniel, standing in the middle of this dusty little outpost beneath the Afghan mountains, reassured the 70 soldiers gathered close around him that they would be going home soon.

Some of the soldiers stood stiff. Others knelt.

All intently watched their 43-year-old commander, a sturdy man with silvery hair from Little Rock, Ark., who had driven in especially from the battalion headquarters to bolster their spirits and their courage.

Until they leave, Colonel Daniel warned them sternly, they have a difficult job to do.

“Afghanistan will have the best chance possible to stand on its own feet,” he said. “Until then we have to look after ourselves.”

But out here in what feels like the edge of the world, in remote eastern Afghanistan near the Pakistan border, the battle is a tough day-to-day reality for these soldiers.

Their base, Combat Outpost Rahman Khel, is a couple of acres of gravel, mustard-colored barracks, a gym tent, a medical hut and a fluttering American flag, hedged by tall, gray Hesco blast walls.

The soldiers posted here, one company of the Fourth Brigade Combat Team of the 25th Infantry Division, have their home base in Alaska. Now, they peer out from shaded watchtowers at miles of flat water meadows where sheep graze and, on the northern horizon, at a low brown mud-brick village with some trees.

In the east are grand hills and a tall, snow-streaked mountain range the soldiers call the Whale.

Sgt. Christopher Keeney was standing in the wind on Watchtower Four holding a pair of binoculars in one hand while he pointed with the other.

These mountains are where coalition forces carried out Operation Anaconda in March 2002 to rout Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters from remote valleys, one of the highest profile operations in the early years of the war.

Ten years later, insurgents are still coming down out of the mountains from Pakistan and the Shah-i-Kot Valley, gathering at a shrine in the foothills and using the plain around Rahman Khel as a transit route to head to the fighting farther west.

“It’s a breeding ground,” said Sergeant Keeney, from Washington State. “At night we see flares and lots of light signals from the villages. It ends up here in the mountains.”

The job of the soldiers at this outpost is to patrol a space of land stretching almost as far as the eye can see.

“We’ve got a pretty big sector,” said Sgt. First Class Jacob Nestor, a short, tough man with a sunburned face and rolling shoulders. He was wearing shades as he scanned the hills.

“It’s from those mountains, 35 clicks out, and 10-20 clicks the other way.”

So far, the men here have been lucky. The camp has received blasts of mortar fire from the village across the meadow to the north, but no one has been hurt.

But this is eastern Afghanistan, and luck holds only so long.

Around midday, the camp learns that a convoy from an outpost five miles away has been ambushed on a road to the north. It sounds bad: A platoon sergeant from another company in their battalion was shot in the thigh and abdomen.

But then word comes that he will live: He has been airlifted to Bagram Airbase, and on to Landstuhl, the military hospital in Germany.

The camp settles into some kind of normalcy. Its own patrol, in a line of three huge, mine-protected vehicles called MRAPs, rolls in from the surrounding villages.

Soldiers climb out, dusty, tired, but safe. Stretching, some get out their chewing tobacco.

As the afternoon wears on, a white civilian aid helicopter of a type the soldiers nickname the Jinglebird descends loudly from the cloudy sky.

Soldiers emerge in clumps from the rec room, hoping the Jinglebird has brought them mail from home.

Colonel Daniel tells them they will be replaced at this outpost after they leave.

But after that, who knows? He says the next year or so will be about closing posts like Rahman Khel, figuring out where the Afghans are strong enough to take control on their own and where they still need help.

It is going to get tough, he warns.

He is about to leave for another base, and his convoy of MRAPs waits impatiently behind him in the brownish morning light that settles on the camp.

He tells them again the reason he came here in the first place: to plant the American flag on Afghan soil and teach the insurgents a lesson for what they did in New York City, he says.

Out here, he promises, he will come to their aid if they need him with all the force the American military possesses. But the fighting is going to intensify before they leave. For these soldiers, the war is still going on.

“We have been very fortunate,” he said in an interview. “It will come.”

And he told the soldiers: “Some of the things you are going to see are hard.”

AFGHANISTAN WAR REPORTS

Foreign Occupation “Servicemember” Killed Somewhere Or Other In Afghanistan: Nationality Not Announced

June 10, 2012 Reuters

A foreign servicemember died following an insurgent attack in southern Afghanistan today.

Family Of Fort Bliss Soldier From El Paso Receives Remains At Biggs Army Airfield



Staff Sgt. Roberto Loeza (Provided by Fort Bliss)

06/07/2012 By Victor R. Martinez, EL PASO TIMES

The family of Staff Sgt. Roberto “Junior” Loeza waited in silence on the tarmac at Biggs Army Airfield for his arrival Wednesday afternoon.

They sat on folding chairs waiting for the jet to arrive.

When it landed, his mother, Benita Loeza, could not hold her silence and broke into tears and wailed in pain -- a pain that everyone felt.

The body of her son had returned home in a casket.

"The entire Fort Bliss family is sad for our loss," said Maj. Gen. Dana J.H. Pittard, commanding general of Fort Bliss and the 1st Armored Division. "Our hearts, our prayers and our thoughts go out to the entire Loeza family. He will not be forgotten. We will always remember his service and always take care of his family."

The Fort Bliss soldier, who was scheduled to return to his hometown of El Paso in July, was killed May 25 during an attack in Afghanistan.

Loeza, who joined the Army in June 2002, died when enemy forces attacked his unit in Charkh in the Logar province, south of the Afghan capital, Kabul, according to the U.S. Department of Defense.

On Wednesday, as the hot desert wind blew across the apron and the 1st Armored Division Band played patriotic songs, the Loeza family walked slowly toward the plane that brought home their son, husband, brother and dad.

As the U.S. flag-draped casket was lowered from the plane, six soldiers lifted their fallen comrade.

As Pittard escorted them, Loeza's wife, Teresa, and members of the immediate family placed their hands on the casket and bowed their heads in prayer.

Again, emotions took over. Grief was so severe that several family members had to walk away.

Teresa Loeza's knees buckled and she walked a few steps away until she doubled over.

The coffin carrying Loeza was slowly rolled to a hearse as members of the Patriot Guard Riders raised the American flags they were holding in honor of Loeza. "The family requested us to come out here to respect and honor and to protect them from unwanted guests," said Jamie Bayley, senior ride captain with Patriot Guard Riders, a motorcycle group whose members attend funerals of U.S. armed forces members, firefighters and police at the invitation of the families. "It hits very close to home for me because I was in the same position as a wife in 1998."

Soldiers of Loeza's 1st Battalion, 41st Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, stood in formation during the 30-minute ramp ceremony.

"Every time it's one of your buddies, it's shocking," said Spc. Charles Kersey who served with Loeza in Afghanistan from September to December 2011. "You don't want to believe it, but you know what, it's war."

Kersey was evacuated from Afghanistan on Dec. 19 after he was blown up by an explosive that broke his jaw, making him temporarily lose his hearing. He also suffered a traumatic brain injury.

“When that happened to me, he was right there with me,” said Kersey, 25. “I don’t remember much, but I do remember them trying to keep me awake, waiting on the bird to pick me up. He was always the jokester type, so he would always crack jokes and that’s what he was doing trying to keep me awake. He always filled the air with laughter. He was an extremely happy guy.”

Kersey, who is from Dallas, said Loeza died doing what he believed in -- fighting for the country he loved. “He loved what he did and he loved training other soldiers to do the same,” he said. “He’s the type of guy who would want us to keep fighting in his honor. He believed in what we are fighting for.”

Pittard said the death of a fellow El Pasoan (Pittard attended Eastwood High School) makes Loeza’s death that much more tragic.

“He was not only part of the Army family but the El Paso community, and that’s what makes it even more touching,” he said. “It’s just tearing us all up. He comes from a very honorable family who was proud of his service, proud of his sister’s service who is in the Navy. It’s a family of patriots who served this country. We are very proud of them all.”

Pittard said it’s also important that El Paso honor local soldiers like Loeza, a 2002 Mountain View High graduate.

“We are one community, and we want the people of El Paso to see, especially someone from El Paso, who served honorably and sacrificed for his country.”

POLITICIANS REFUSE TO HALT THE BLOODSHED

**THE TROOPS HAVE THE POWER TO STOP THE
WAR**

**“The War In Afghanistan Has Turned
The Country Into A Major Supplier Of
The World’s Opium And Heroin
Supplies”**

If The West Were To Decriminalise The Use Of Heroin “This Would Erode The Black Market Which Confers So Much Of The Value”

11 Jun 2012 By Graeme Dobell, ABC [Excerpts]

The war in Afghanistan has turned the country into a major supplier of the world's opium and heroin supplies.

That is one of the facts offered by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in a report on how the drugs trade is fuelling insecurity and failed states, called 'Drugs, Insecurity and Failed States - the problems of prohibition'.

One of the authors of the report Nigel Inkster, a former director of operations and intelligence of the British spy service, spoke to Radio Australia's Graeme Dobell.

He said that ending drug prohibition would take a lot of criminal pressure off weak states, but in Afghanistan the drug problem is now a long-term factor in the country's future.

“If the west were to decriminalise the use of heroin, and for example to make supplies available to addicts on prescription, this would erode, eventually, though not entirely eliminate the black market which confers so much of the value.”

“The value of the heroin trade really accrues to those who control the trafficking routes and that is where the big mark ups take place,” he said.

SOMALIA WAR REPORTS

“Al Shabab Militants Recaptured The Town Of El Bur Shortly After Pro-Government Forces Arrived On Sunday”

10 June 2012 Shabelle Media Network

El-Bur — Columns of Ethiopian troops and pro government Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a ASWJ fighters backed by armored vehicles have on Sunday pulled out completely from the main town of Al Bur in Galgadud region, central Somalia, local residents said.

Residents say the Al shabab militants recaptured the town of El Bur shortly after pro-government forces arrived on Sunday, accompanied by members of the moderate Islamist ASWJ militia, which is fighting alongside Somalia's UN-backed government.

"We woke up this morning seeing Ethiopian armored personnel carriers withdrawing from the town, and Al shabab fighters pouring into the city without a single shot," El Bur residents reported.

Questions rose about the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from El Bur town, which lies just about 150 kilometers (90 miles) south of the Ethiopian border. Ethiopian troops re-entered Somalia last year to help Somali government war on Al shabab and have taken positions in south-central Somalia.

FORWARD OBSERVATIONS



"At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. Oh had I the ability, and could reach the nation's ear, I would, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke.

"For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder.

"We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake."

"The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppose."

Frederick Douglass, 1852

I say that when troops cannot be counted on to follow orders because they see the futility and immorality of them THAT is the real key to ending a war.

-- Al Jaccoma, Veterans For Peace

**“Syria’s Creative Resistance”
“It Is Not The Elite Artists Or
Intellectuals Who Form The Avant-
Garde, But The Ordinary People”
“The Leader’s Cult Has Become So
Ingrained That The Authorities Don’t
Know How To Deal With The Fact
That The Uprising Is Largely A
Popular One”
“With Home Videos, Citizens Have Also
Defied Official Propaganda Depicting
Protesters As Armed Gangs And
Terrorists”**

Jun 08 2012 by Layla Al-Zubaidi, Jadaliyya.com/

Bashar al-Assad snores, his head twitching on a large white pillow. Suddenly, he wakes up. “The people want to overthrow me!” he screams, the pompom on his nightcap bouncing.

A military officer approaches, pats him on the head and whispers gently, as if comforting a toddler: “Don’t worry, my dear Mr. President, nobody wants to bring you down. Go back to sleep.”

“But I dreamed that the people don’t love me anymore!”

“We all love you, Mr. President”, says the officer, “but you have to rest. Tomorrow is Friday and we have a lot of work to do!”

Bashar lies back on his pillow and dozes off.

“Sleep...sleep...let nothing disturb your dreams”, the officer croons: “You will see how we deal with terrorists, Salafis and conspirators. We’ll get rid of them for you...”

But Bashar’s nightmare becomes reality.

From beneath the wooden stage two actors emerge, their faces swathed in keffiyas. With gleaming eyes, they swing hand puppets from side to side. “How beautiful is freedom!” they chant to the beat of a drum.

There were only a few of us in the audience. Sworn to secrecy, we squatted on the floor of a dark stage at the back of a Beirut theatre on a cold November evening.

Since the Syrian uprising began, Beirut has seen Syrian dissident artists flock to the city in search of refuge, taking over the few alternative pubs where food and drinks are affordable.

Listening in on their gatherings, it was fascinating to notice that their heated conversations, instead of being only gloomy as one would expect, were peppered with political jokes and punch lines from the satirical slogans, songs, and videos circulating all over Syria and on the Internet.

“I Decided To Seek Out Some Of The Creative Minds Contributing To The Uprising”

After my initial encounters, I decided to seek out some of the creative minds contributing to the uprising – in Lebanon as well as Syria – and asked some of my new Syrian friends to introduce me to this world.

It is a world that came into being more than a year ago but which receives scant attention from the international media because it is mainly expressed in Arabic.

One day I received a phone call, and was invited to witness the making of the play.

The actors decided to hide their identities during performances, after being detained during the March of Intellectuals and Artists that was held in Damascus on 13 July 2011. Grotesque wooden puppets, created by a famed Syrian artist, have taken their place. Jamil (not his real name), the play’s director, had smuggled them into Lebanon, garbed in wigs and big moustaches. The performance was not going to be put on live, but rather recorded and uploaded onto the Internet.

“Even outside of Syria, we’re not safe from regime thugs,” the actors said, then pointed at the puppets now scattered lifelessly on the floor:

“We’re terrorists and trouble-makers. Don’t you see our weapons?”

A young woman from Damascus continued to work on the décor, pinning a golden frame to a picture of Hafez al-Assad. Once an almost sacred icon, now ripe for ridicule.

Only a few weeks after it was posted on YouTube, the play – Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator – had received tens of thousands of views.

It is just one of a wealth of satirical dramas, jokes, chants, graffiti slogans, videos, songs, and dances that have proliferated since Syrians began to rise up against the rule of the Assads.

Ill-fated attempts by the international community to chart a way out of the current impasse and a rising death toll have led to growing despair, pushing the essentially civil uprising over the brink and into the abyss of armed conflict. This conflict has overshadowed how the revolutionary spirit has nurtured the satire and wit for which the country is famous, and imbued daily life with an unprecedented outburst of creative expression.

For decades, Syrians would do no more than whisper. “Even walls have ears,” was a popular saying. Political jokes were kept within trusted circles and people were forced to bow to the iconography of their leader, a cult celebrated in schools, public spaces, cultural productions and the media.

“We Don’t Love You!”

As the uprising evolved, the state media, sticking with the delusional narrative that all protesters are armed terrorists, has lost its grip on most of the public.

A powerful counter-culture unlocked minds, drawing on popular tradition and skillfully exploiting the tools of modern communications technology.

I set out for Damascus from Lebanon in April 2012.

On the Syrian side of the border, we passed Zabadani, a resort town nestled into idyllic green hills, where fierce fighting was taking place.

It was here that the simplest and most sardonic slogan of the revolution was dreamt up, eventually spreading to songs and walls across the country.

“We don’t love you!” might sound harmless to outsiders, but it strikes a lethal blow to the cult of the leader built on the idea that the Syrian people are children who adore their fatherly leader.

Minhibbak (We love you) was a line that Syrians had to repeat over and over again: an order to love.

Today, supporters of the uprising are making fun of it, calling groups loyal to the regime the minhibbakjiyeh: the ‘We-Love-Yous’.

Challenging the cult of the leader has always been a highly subversive act and Syrians often chose to do it with humour.

One day in the mid-nineties, while living with my aunt in Damascus for a year, I accompanied a cousin to a school march. The pupils were chanting, "Hafiz al-Assad, the eternal leader!" when suddenly a group of older pupils started bleating, "Ha-a-a-fiz al-A-a-a-ssad, the e-e-e-ternal le-e-e-ader," then dissolved in giggles.

My cousin froze in horror, and when I saw her face I realized the seriousness of what they had done. The young men were lucky. Their little performance went unnoticed, and for a few minutes they had successfully ridiculed both the leader and themselves.

It was schoolchildren in Deraa, probably the same age as the bleating, cackling kids I saw twenty years earlier, who were tortured for spraying subversive graffiti on walls, and whose enraged families unleashed the uprising when they took to the streets in protest.

"It Is Not The Elite Artists Or Intellectuals Who Form The Avant-Garde, But The Ordinary People"

"It is the unthinkable that people now think, say and do", writer Hassan Abbas told me. If one seeks to learn about Syria, it is always good to talk to him first, as he is the country's walking encyclopedia.

Abbas was surprised by how forcefully Syrians emerged as a people: "It is not the elite artists or intellectuals who form the avant-garde, but the ordinary people."

He compared them to Aladdin, who was trapped, tiny and insignificant, in the magic lamp, only to swell into a giant after being released.

For the first time Syrians are getting to know their own geography, he remarked.

Maps of Syria used to be prohibited for security reasons and libraries would import maps from Jordan or Lebanon, instead.

"I consider myself an expert on Syria", he said, "But suddenly places are springing up out of nowhere and we're hearing dialects that we never knew about.

"Now it's the simple people in the country, whom everyone considered illiterates, who are giving us an education. Look at Kfar Nibl."

Kfar Nibl, a village in northern Syria near Idlib, was entirely unknown until sarcasm and wit put it on the map.

Kfar Nibl has become a trademark for the best and funniest slogans, shared and disseminated by activists and fans.

When the Arab League monitors arrived in Damascus and took up residence at the Sheraton Hotel, a picture was passed around showing a group of villagers holding a banner that read: The people of Kfar Nibl demand the building of 5-star hotels, so that we can attract the Arab monitors to visit us!

Such high-spirited defiance did not go unpunished, however. Security forces invaded the village several times, but the slogans continue.

Crushing non-violent resistance was a deliberate move, Abbas argued, it was an attempt to force people into taking up arms against a military Goliath: "Why was it the peaceful activists who were detained and tortured?" He believes that the regime's worst enemy is people gathering peacefully in public space.

Day by day, protests move closer from the suburbs to the centre of Damascus, but the protesters have not yet managed to occupy the capital's major squares. In April 2011, protesters at Abbasiyeen Square were received with heavy gunfire. Protesters at the central squares in Homs and Hama met the same fate.

"Because this public space was destroyed early on, it was transmuted from the physical to the cultural and spiritual sphere and dispersed all over Syria like droplets of water", explained Abbas, naming formerly sleepy villages where protests on the streets and squares continued to spring up. "We don't have a collective space, but at least we have our collective dance."

"Syrians Have Been Gagged For So Long, Samira Explained, That Popular Culture Is Subversive On Every Level"

The brio with which Syrians revived traditional music and dance is not only a thorn in the side of the authorities.

Ultra-radical Sunni cleric Adnan al-Arour, who fled his hometown Hama in the 1980s to exile in Saudi Arabia, uses religious satellite channels to incite against Shia and Alawites. But he is also determined to prevent protesters from chanting and dancing on the grounds that such activities are haram, or religiously prohibited.

He called upon Abdel-Baset Sarrouf to stop singing and mingling with women in public.

Sarrouf, called the 'nightingale of the revolution' by his fans and a 'Salafist emir' by the regime, is actually the goalkeeper for a Homs soccer team.

His rise to fame began when he led demonstrating crowds in Homs, singing from the shoulders of protesters at the front of the crowd. The documentary *Waer (Rough)* shot by Syrian filmmaker Samira (not her real name) is a compelling account of his story.

Samira met me in the street.

"Let's just walk," she said. "I've never enjoyed it so much."

Detained for months by the security services, she has found it hard to recover. When al-Arabiyya broadcast her film in November and she was confined to a cell, entire streets in Homs were deserted as people headed home to their TV sets. One of her earliest decisions was to film in Homs, sensing somehow that the city with its sectarian divisions would become a contested battleground. People had this strong desire to identify with someone, Samira said, and from the most complex of all places emerged this voice, expressing what they felt.

“Being of Bedouin origin Sarrout has natural self-confidence, and he spends quite some time in front of the mirror,” Samira laughed, “Women adore him like Brad Pitt and men strive to be like him.”

Sarrout, targeted several times by regime forces, is now in hiding and makes occasional appearances to lend his support to the protests.

In an early December broadcast on a programme featuring al-Arour, on a channel also owned by him, Sarrout phoned in. Arguing that song was the weapon of the unarmed, he proceeded to sing live on the show, ignoring the cleric. He also teamed up with prominent Alawite actress Fadia Suleiman until she was forced to flee the country.

Syrians have been gagged for so long, Samira explained, that popular culture is subversive on every level: “It breaks with the Stalinist culture that the Baath Party imposed on the country, and ridicules the elite culture on show at the Damascus Opera, so removed from people’s lives.

Lastly, when people shout ‘God is great’ while dancing and singing, they also defy Islamism and Salafism, because none of this is allowed in strict religious interpretation.”

“We Don’t Want To Be Bullshitted Anymore”

In Damascus, home of the political and security establishment, dissenters are forced into hiding. I visited Sami (name changed) and a group of activists in an apartment lit with neon lamps and thick with cigarette smoke. We sat on mattresses and sipped tea. Sami calls himself a “freelancer for the revolution.”

The reason he gives for joining the uprising is simple and precise: “We don’t want to be bullshitted anymore.” He stubbed out his cigarette, lit another and apologized that he couldn’t open the window to let in fresh air. “We don’t want the neighbours to overhear our conversation, right?”

“Uninspired, reactionary, and without vision” is how Sami described the regime’s propaganda machine: “They don’t have anything meaningful to say, this is why they are imitating the revolution.” He laughed, remembering how once, the shabiha, while they emulated the revolutionary slogan “Freedom forever, even against your will Bashar!” shouted “Shabiha forever, even against your will Bashar!”

Internet-savvy, long haired, familiar with Western subculture and casually mentioning his girlfriend, he embodies the prototype of the handsome, modern and secular Arab revolutionary that adorned the covers of Western magazines last year, before elections in Tunisia and Egypt brought Islamic beards back to the front pages.

Islamists don’t particularly scare him.

“What’s the difference?” he asked, “When people are forced to kiss Bashar al-Assad’s picture and recite La illaha illa Bashar (There’s no God but Bashar) isn’t that a religious cult just like the Islamists’ unquestioned worship of God?”

In Sami's opinion the leader's cult has become so ingrained that the authorities don't know how to deal with the fact that the uprising is largely a popular one:

“They always need to nail down dark personalities that stir people from abroad. This is how figures like al-Arouf gain significance in the first place.”

The group wants to stir up central Damascus, where life continues at an almost normal pace. They mobilized for several strikes, often in vain. Sami was the one who disabled bank machines in Damascus' upmarket neighbourhoods when residents ignored a general strike called for by the protesters. He produced plain plastic cards resembling credit cards, coated them with superglue and stuck them into the machines' slots. Amused, he recalled how bank clerks with red faces desperately tried to pull them out of the machines, cursing the cards with the crudest insults.

I walked into a quiet neighbourhood tucked behind the busy Baghdad Street, where I paid a visit to the atelier of Youssef Abdelke. He welcomed me through a small wooden door, which like so many of the city's tiny entrances, conceals a spacious and beautiful Ottoman courtyard house covered in black and white tiles. Abdelke is one of the country's most prominent painters and a co-founder of the Art and Freedom Facebook page.

Hibiscus tea was boiling on the stove and he offered me some, doves cooing in the courtyard. His hair pulled back into a ponytail had turned snow-white. After being detained for leftist political activities under Hafez al-Assad, he spent twenty-four years living in exile in Paris. Since his return to Syria in 2008, authorities have prevented him from travelling, not by imposing the formal travel ban that is wielded against many from the political opposition, but by the equally common and effective method of stalling the renewal of his passport. In order to get it, he would have to visit the internal security to settle “old issues.”

“Are you crazy?” he shouted, when I asked if it might not be worth it, then burst out laughing: “At my age I'm not going to audition at state security as if I was the criminal and they were the patriots.”

He seems at peace. To find freedom in exile is an illusion, he believes: “It's more of a political statement to be silent in Syria than to speak out abroad.”

He is far from silent himself, however. His group invites artists to submit works that give expression to the uprising. He also took the initiative to found an independent union of artists. Any artistic production has to be submitted for clearance to national cultural institutions that operate under the culture ministry and are staffed with personnel close to the circles of power. While painters often managed to evade censorship in the past, as they were not gathered under a specialised body comparable to the powerful cinema and theatre institutions, the culture ministry has resumed pre-censoring exhibitions since the uprising began: We have returned to the spirit of the 1980s, when exhibitions were prohibited after the Hama massacre. Abdelke didn't expect to be showing his work in Damascus anytime soon. Instead, it is touring Paris, Beirut and Cairo, while the artist remains behind.

“The City Has Become An Orwellian Nightmare”

Unlike Abdelke, Firas (name changed) is a man leading a double life. I met him on Jabal Qasioun, the mountain that looms over Damascus and offers spectacular views of the city. Where families used to escape the sweltering heat of the city, most of the former picnic huts have been torn down. The only venue spared was a fancy restaurant at the summit, the property of business tycoon and regime crony Mohammad al-Khouly. We roamed along the row of dimly lit cafés that replaced the huts and which used to cater to Gulf visitors coming to pick up Iraqi women thrown into prostitution by war and poverty. Now they are almost empty. We finally settled on a tiger skin sofa. Surrounded by plastic palm trees illuminated in pink, a huge TV screen blared Lebanese pop songs above our heads.

“Yes, here nobody will recognize me.” Satisfied, Firas nodded and ordered strawberry milkshakes. One of the few popular television stars who made the decision to side with the uprising, he has come to harbour a distaste for the official cultural productions that made his name and which continue to be churned out despite the unrest.

In recent years, Syria became known for its lavish drama series; part-funded by Gulf monarchies, they were so successful that they managed to supplant Egyptian productions, which had dominated television screens across the region for decades. Syrian television actors rose to stardom and attracted huge numbers of adoring fans. Since the uprising began, many of them have chosen to remain silent, if not to defend the regime.

“After some actors signed a petition against the assault on Deraa, they were threatened. Most are now scared shitless,” said Firas.

Syrian drama started out relatively low budget and was therefore shot on location, not in studios. Authenticity has become its trademark, but now most locations are inaccessible, and some Gulf countries refuse to buy Syrian productions. Even so, said Firas, “they still try to project an image that all is fine.” Firas first quit all his television projects, but recently picked up work again to avoid the security radar: “If you say no too many times you raise suspicion.” I inquired why he didn’t out himself to the public as a supporter of the uprising. “And then what?” he countered, “Being in the spotlight and losing the chance to contribute anything meaningful?”

Instead, he chose to shoot clandestine documentaries that are broadcast on Arab satellite channels. “If our society is ever to heal, we need proper documentation of better quality than shaky videos on YouTube.” The wind blew, and down below the white and green lights of Damascus flickered. He took a deep breath: “It’s good to look down from above. The city has become an Orwellian nightmare.”

Protesters in Orwellian Damascus have had to resort to a creative use of the Internet. Where it was too risky to take to the streets, home videos emerged as a medium to replace demonstrations.

An inspiring precedent was created by women in Damascus in May 2011, when they started to upload “home sit-ins,” wearing black sunglasses and holding scarves in front of their faces as they chanted for a civil state and democracy.

In a gathering of artists, I talked to Loay (name changed), a playwright who had filmed such sit-ins. The guests suddenly began arguing about armament. Contradictions arose and voices grew louder. Loay paused, peeking out from the terrace on the street to check whether passersby might be listening. “We should safeguard the civic soul of this revolution,” he remarked, “and I believe that women will be the leaders in that.”

“He Pointed Out That It Was Young Women Who Recently Took Their Protest To The Heart Of Political And Business Establishments”

He pointed out that it was young women who recently took their protest to the heart of political and business establishments.

On April 10, 2012, the day that the ceasefire negotiated through Kofi Annan’s initiative was supposed to come into effect, 34-year-old Rima Dali poured white paint on her red dress in front of the parliament, holding up a sign that read: Stop the killing. We want a homeland for all Syrians. A few days later, four young women sprawled like corpses on the floor of Damascino Mall while upper-class shoppers tripped around them.

“What they are doing is very smart,” explained Loay. “Since the regime depicts protesters as murderous terrorists, it is difficult to punish people for demanding an end to violence and a nation for all.”

Hardly out of prison, Rima Dali busied herself again organizing a whole campaign. “We have to do everything we can to show that the Syrian people want a political solution,” she told me on Skype. “The revolution is being hijacked by so many different actors who have an interest in fuelling conflict. If the initiative has given us anything, it is a bit of space to revive non-violent activism. We cannot let this opportunity pass, too.”

“With Home Videos, Citizens Have Also Defied Official Propaganda Depicting Protesters As Armed Gangs And Terrorists”

Back in Beirut, close to the bus station where the cabs and buses from Syria pull in, I joined Mustafa Haid in a backdoor café: a favourite hangout for Syrian activists.

A human rights researcher who had been banned from travelling for several years, he now spends any spare time he has surfing the Internet for new creative output and recording it in his notebook: “If we don’t archive all these expressions, they will be forgotten.”

Cycling through clips he demonstrates how the credibility of the official narrative has been slowly eroded, with almost every piece of state propaganda meeting immediate ridicule in home video format.

When the first massive protest emerged in Midan, state television reported seriously that people took to the street in order to thank God for the rainfall.

Haid shows me a weather forecast video that appeared on the Internet a few days later, showing rainclouds over Damascus, with the headline: Important news. The people of

Midan thank God for the rain, while Al-Jazeera insists on describing them as pro-democracy protesters!

With home videos, citizens have also defied official propaganda depicting protesters as armed gangs and terrorists.

Haid made a note of the first, very simple home video of the uprising, which appeared in March 2011.

It shows a small boy, standing blindfolded and handcuffed on a sofa in his living room while a voice intones: "We captured the armed gangs." The camera pans from the child to an assortment of weapons spread out at his feet: plastic guns and 25 lira coins.

Another early video, this one from Homs, shows three men with the common requisites of an armed terrorist group: keffeyas, Kalashnikovs, and beards. A voice orders them to reveal their weapons: one thrusts a zucchini towards the camera, the second an eggplant, while the third reveals an ammunition belt filled with okra strapped around his waist.

Admitting with a grin that Syrians are obsessed with food, Haid shows me one of his favourites.

It is an early video, a response to an official television broadcast in which an alleged eye-witness described how terrorists were stuffing 500 lira notes and drugs into kebab sandwiches and using them as bribes to make people protest.

Two young men from Hama promptly uploaded a fake cooking show called, Eat and Protest! Speaking into a cucumber instead of a microphone, the chef announces the dish of the day: "the 500 lira kebab."

He runs through the ingredients: "First we slice open the bread and stuff it with kebab (low-fat, of course, so it doesn't soak the money). Today, we'll be using the dynamite-flavoured pills, which are especially suitable for suicide attacks. We crush them up, so the protesters can't taste them. Then we carefully sprinkle the powder on the kebab so it can't be seen. Wrap the money tightly around the sandwich. Bon appetit. If you want to know how delicious and effective this sandwich is, you can ask the 500,000 people who took to the streets in Hama just to get hold of one."

For Haid, what is underway is more than a mere uprising: "Dictatorships play on fear, and create almost sacred taboos. This is why these forms of expression are truly revolutionary: they desecrate the symbols of power," he said.

As biting dissent has stripped the regime of whatever legitimacy it once enjoyed, he bitterly admits, it is now naked violence and the higher stakes of international politics that keep it standing.

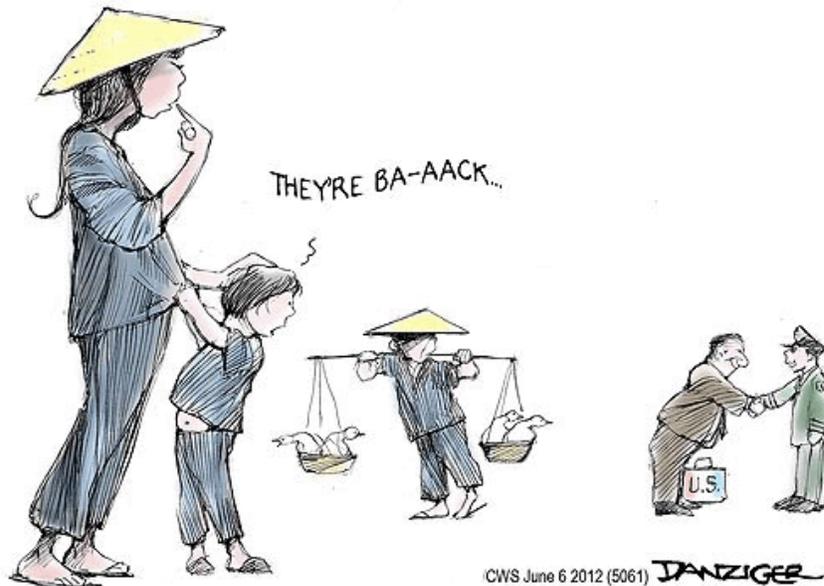
He finds wisdom in an entry on a Facebook page: The regime is gone, but how do we get rid of it?

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DANGER: POLITICIANS AT WORK

Defense Secretary Panetta Seeks Deal for US in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam



**The Government Jails Teens For
Having Sex Or Being Late To
School:
“The U.S. Locks Up Children At More
Than Six Times The Rate Of All Other
Developed Nations”**

“The Over 60,000 Average Daily Juvenile Lockups Are Also Disproportionately Young People Of Color”

June 5, 2012 By Sarah Seltzer, AlterNet [Excerpts]

The behavior that gets teens sent to jail ranges from merely illegal on paper to truly morally wrong, deserving of punishment, perhaps even dangerous.

But exactly what kind of punishments we do issue to young people -- and what kind of help we offer them--speaks volumes about our society.

A 2007 Campaign for Youth Justice report titled “Jailing Juveniles” points out the obvious flaws in using adult prisons and jails as repositories for youth.

First of all, young people in these facilities are vulnerable either to assault by adult inmates, or if siphoned off, the brutal psychological toll of isolation.

On a more basic level,

“Jails do not have the capacity to provide the necessary education and other programs crucial for the healthy development of adolescents...without adequate education and other services jails take youth off course.”

And even though legal requirements for education do exist, they are often unmet or poorly met, the report explains.

So rather than rehabilitating kids, sending them to jail often exacerbates whatever problem sent them there.

Beyond the practice of jailing younger kids in adult facilities, youth detention centers have their own intrinsic problems. Just this April Wired published a riveting photo collection by Richard Ross, whose project, “Juvenile in Justice,” uses photography gathered from juvenile detention centers around the country. The pictures, and the piece, pointed out both our massive overuse of such facilities and their failures.

Author Pete Brook, who interviewed the photographer, noted:

“The U.S. locks up children at more than six times the rate of all other developed nations.

“The over 60,000 average daily juvenile lockups, a figure estimated by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF), are also disproportionately young people of color.

“With an average cost of \$80,000 per year to lock up a child, the U.S. spends more than \$5 billion annually on youth detention.

“On top of the cost, in its recent report No Place for Kids, the AECF presents evidence to show that youth incarceration does not reduce recidivism rates, does not benefit public safety and exposes those imprisoned to further abuse and violence.”

In some studies cited by Brook, states with efforts to halt or reverse the incarceration of youth actually saw a drop in violent crimes committed by under-18s; in other words, the incarceration was increasing crime, not reducing it.

Young people, especially those without resources, will make mistakes and cause trouble, but there are better ways to hold young people accountable than tossing them in prison. One way to start reforming the criminal justice system would be to take a second look at the way it handles, categorizes and “rehabilitates” young people, and consider alternatives.

The logic that young people need a different kind of response for offenses occurs across the board. In January, the Daily Beast profiled moms whose sons, as older teenagers, were arrested and convicted for statutory rape after sleeping with their younger girlfriends (to be fair, some were re-arrested for violating the terms of probation):

Activist groups argue that teens who miss the parameters should go to a counseling or treatment center, not to jail. They also argue that teens shouldn’t be placed on the sex-offender registries.

Alison Parker, the U.S. program director for Human Rights Watch, argues the laws should change. “Common sense says that kids are different from adults,” she says. “Kids can grow and change. They are extremely unlikely to reoffend.”

MORE

**“Francie Baldino Can Tell You
The Day She Became An
Activist Against America’s Sex-
Offender Laws”**

**“It Was The Day Her Teenage Son
Went To Prison For Falling In Love
With A Teenage Girl”**

“A Surprising Rebellion That Has Now Spread To All 50 States: Parents Fighting Against Sex-Offender Laws”

“The Laws Are Imposing Punishments On Their High-School Sons That Are Out Of Proportion To The Crime”



“I’m not a victim,” says Emily Lester today. Photograph by Robyn Twomey for Newsweek

Jan 25, 2012 By Abigail Pesta, The Daily Beast [Excerpts]

Francie Baldino, a mother of two from Royal Oak, Mich., can tell you the day she became an activist against America’s sex-offender laws. It was the day her teenage son went to prison — for falling in love with a teenage girl.

The prison term was unthinkable,” says Baldino. “He was just a dumb kid.”

Her son, Ken, was an 18-year-old senior in high school when he was arrested for having sex with his girlfriend, a 14-year-old freshman, in 2004.

The age of consent in Michigan is 16. He got sentenced to a year in jail and three years’ probation. After that, when the two teens resumed their relationship — violating his probation — he got five to 15 years.

His mother is part of a surprising rebellion that has now spread to all 50 states: parents fighting against sex-offender laws — the very laws designed to safeguard their children.

These parents argue that the laws are imposing punishments on their high-school sons that are out of proportion to the crime.

Baldino's son, for instance, spent more than six years behind bars and today must wear a GPS device the size of a box of butter.

Sometimes, he says, it loses its signal and sets off an alarm. "That's really helpful when I'm at work," says the blue-eyed 26-year-old, who wears stud earrings and works at a door-and-window store.

No one keeps a tally of how many cases fall into this category nationwide.

But there is one measure of the scale of the movement: there are now more than 50 organizations — at least one in every state — battling against prosecutions like these.

Baldino's group is Michigan Citizens for Justice, which she says includes more than 100 parents. Another group in Michigan, the Coalition for a Useful Registry, has around 150 parents as members, it says. Organizations in other states report similar numbers. One of the largest, Texas Voices, claims some 300 parents as members.

The judge in the Baldino case, Fred Mester, openly acknowledged the complexities.

Referring to his own high-school days when handing down the prison sentence in 2005, he said, "Half my senior class ... were dating freshman girls, and I suspect half of them would be in here today."

Baldino is quick to say that she doesn't advocate underage sex. And both she and her son admit he broke the law. He "did stupid things," she says, including getting in a physical fight with his girlfriend's father one evening in 2004—a fight that began the chain of events that led to the police being called, and his arrest for underage sex.

Baldino argues simply that the law should treat teenage lovers differently from pedophiles or violent sexual predators.

"The punishment is too extreme for kids," she says. "It's a system that's not working."

On a recent rainy afternoon, Francie Baldino steps into her kitchen and pulls out a favorite photo of her son as a toddler, dressed in a bee costume. Then she sits down at the table and describes the events that sent him to prison.

Baldino was a remarried mother of two when her son, Ken Thornsberry (who uses his father's surname), met a girl named Emily Lester at a local Tower Records. The two teenagers were living with their fathers in the wake of divorce; both were struggling to find their footing at home and at school, says Baldino. They attended different high

schools, but started spending all their free time together. Eventually, they slept together, although they certainly didn't announce that to their parents.

Lester, now 22 and living in nearby Lake Orion, Mich., remembers the romance fondly. "I'll never forget that day we met," she says, recalling evenings spent wandering the county fair with her boyfriend, or listening to him play guitar in his high-school band. "I've never loved someone like Ken."

Her father disapproved of the relationship, Lester says, and told the pair to split up. (Her father didn't respond to attempts to contact him.)

The teens didn't listen.

"Ken was young," says Baldino. "He was in love. He thought nothing bad could happen to him." She admits that she wishes she had paid more attention, but in hindsight says she was focusing too much on running a graphic-design business.

One morning, Thornsberry drove to Lester's house when he thought her father would be at work. His plan, he says: to pick up some belongings and drive his girlfriend to school. But her father saw Thornsberry outside the home and the two started arguing. Thornsberry kicked open the front door and hurled a sugar bowl at the TV. The father called the police. Thornsberry was arrested for home invasion.

When questioned by detectives, Thornsberry, then 18, admitted to sleeping with his 14-year-old girlfriend.

On the advice of his attorney, he pleaded guilty to criminal sexual misconduct and was sentenced to a year in jail followed by three years' probation, during which time he could not be around minors, including his girlfriend.

He would also go on the sex-offender registry, which would list his home address and other personal information, for 25 years.

Baldino visited her son regularly in jail. "People say that when you're 18, you're an adult," she says. "But he was just a kid."

Activists raise an interesting point: at what age does a person become an adult? The voting age is 18. The drinking age is 21. A person can join the military at the age of 17, with parental permission.

The age of consent for sex varies by state, from age 16 to 18—so sex can be a crime in one state and not in another.

There are now more than 700,000 registered sex offenders nationwide, according to the Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Every state has its own registry; 34 states register youth offenders. There are no national statistics on the number of youths, because not every state keeps track.

Individual state numbers vary: in Michigan, there are 1,341 registered youths. In Texas, there are 4,519; in Wisconsin, 1,687.

Ken Thornsberry emerged from the county jail in 2005.

He was 19 years old, and had a GED and a new job with his father's contracting company. He stuck to his probation terms and didn't see Emily Lester — for the first few months, anyway.

Then, she contacted him, and he started secretly seeing her.

"He was acting like a dumb teenager," Baldino says. One day, Lester's father came home and found Thornsberry with his daughter. Back to jail he went.

In a court hearing, Lester pleaded her boyfriend's case. "It's just like, we were in love, and it's just not fair," she said, according to court documents. "It's not like I was 12 or something."

The prosecuting attorney, Kenneth Frazee, disagreed. "I think the victim you saw today is a person that's very much in need of our protection," he told the judge.

Judge Mester sympathized with the teens, pointing out that society encourages sex: "That's all we read about ... these heroic celebrities from Hollywood telling us how we're going to live our lives free and easy."

But the law, he said, is clear. He sentenced Thornsberry to five to 15 years.

"I made bad choices. I did stupid stuff," Thornsberry says today, standing in his mother's kitchen.

He got out of prison in August after more than six years.

He was due to get out in five, but needed to take a sex-offender class first, and it was overbooked. He is now on parole for two years. He wears a GPS bracelet on his ankle and carries an accompanying black metal box that beeps if he loses a signal or if he moves away from approved locales.

For the next two years, he cannot be around kids and must attend weekly sex-offender classes.

He is not allowed to use a computer or cellphone camera. He's 26 and has never used Facebook.

He demonstrates the heft of the GPS box, which weighs about a pound, by clipping it to his back pocket, causing his jeans to comically droop. He jokes about the time he left it on the counter at a gas station and the clerk thought it was a bomb.

Thornsberry laughs easily. His mother laughs with him, even when he mentions that when he was new in prison, an inmate offered him \$60 to walk around the cell in his underpants — an offer he declined.

As her son speaks, Baldino flips through a stack of drawings he produced in prison: angry demons, a heart blown apart. Thornberry's arms tell a story, too. When he went to prison, he had a couple of tattoos, he says — a star, a zipper around his wrist. He

emerged with two fully covered arms, ringed with vines and bloodshot eyes. One of the inmates had rigged up a tattoo machine.

Baldino founded her reform group while her son was in prison.

Some new “Romeo and Juliet” laws — inspired by parent-activists like Baldino — are designed to help high-school students in this predicament. The laws aim to reduce the penalties for sex with a minor, provided the couple’s age difference is minimal and other parameters are met. But some parents say the laws are still imperfect. For instance, the mandated age difference might be three years, but a boy might be three years and a month older than the girl.

Activist groups argue that teens who miss the parameters should go to a counseling or treatment center, not to jail.

They also argue that teens shouldn’t be placed on the sex-offender registries.

Alison Parker, the U.S. program director for Human Rights Watch, argues the laws should change. “Common sense says that kids are different from adults,” she says. “Kids can grow and change. They are extremely unlikely to reoffend.”

The recidivism rate among juveniles who commit sex offenses is 4 to 7 percent, she says, citing a study published in *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*.

For adults, she notes, the recidivism rate is 13 percent, according to a study in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

Dena Teska, a mother in Sturgeon Bay, Wis., agrees. Last month, her son Christian was sentenced to nine months in jail.

He was 18 when he was arrested, in 2010, for having a sexual relationship with his 15-year-old girlfriend. A fellow student had told a school guidance counselor about the relationship, and the counselor told the police. The age of consent in Wisconsin is 18.

He pleaded guilty to fourth-degree sexual assault and was sentenced to probation for two years, during which time he had to stay away from his girlfriend. He didn’t. Arrested again this past fall, he will serve his sentence in the county jail.

His mother admits he made mistakes but thinks jail is not the answer.

“My son thinks he has found the love of his life,” she says. “He’s a teenager. They should put him in a treatment program, not a horrendously wicked place.”

High-school sweethearts Ken Thornsberry and Emily Lester had a brief reunion this past August, in court. Thornsberry, newly out of prison, had a chance to petition the court to remove his name from the sex-offender registry, due to a new law spurred on by parent activists. In order to be freed from the registry, he needed to petition two judges. The first judge had ruled against him, so Lester was called upon to appear before the second judge.

“I was so nervous,” Lester says, describing the morning she got the call. “I hadn’t seen Ken in eight years.” She begins to cry. “He hugged me. It’s like we just picked up where we left off. I wasn’t nervous anymore. It was him.”

The two are not allowed to contact each other for the next two years, as she is considered his victim.

“I’m not a victim,” she says.

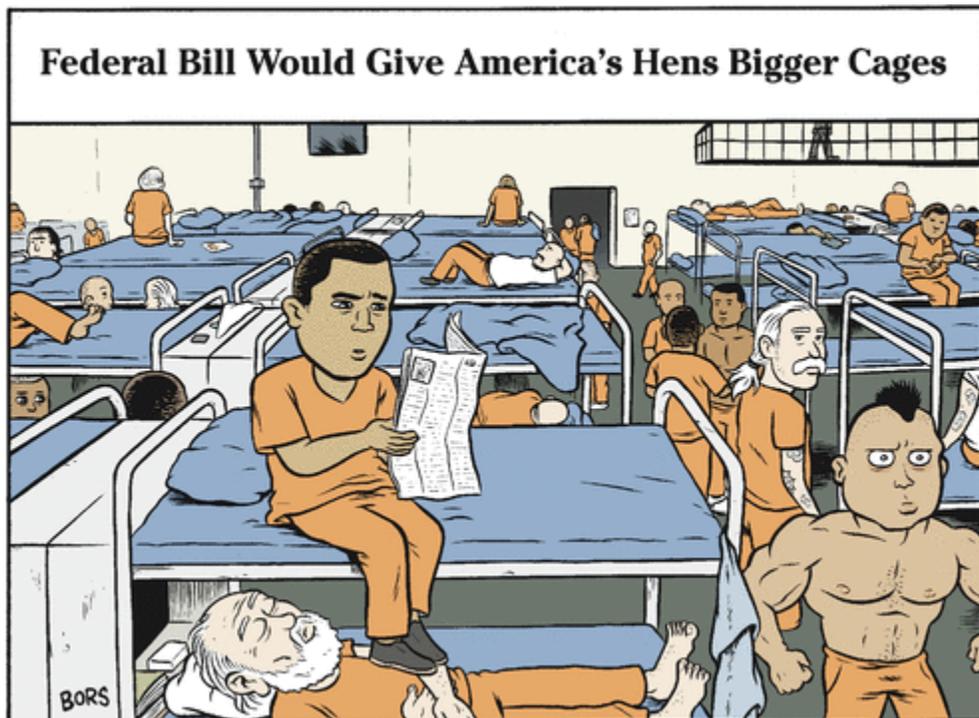
The term makes her angry.

“I’m not a minor. He didn’t rape me.”

She has moved on, and so has he.

Both today are dating other people. But there are unresolved feelings, Lester says: “Our relationship was just cut off.”

CLASS WAR REPORTS



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DO YOU HAVE A FRIEND OR RELATIVE IN THE MILITARY?



U.S. soldier in Beijia village Iraq, Feb. 4, 2008. (AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)

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