

Belly of the Beast

Eric R. Sterner

NIR ROSEN, *In the Belly of the Green Bird: The Triumph of the Martyrs in Iraq* (New York: The Free Press, 2006), 288 pp.

Nir Rosen is a brave man. A native New Yorker who speaks Arabic with an Iraqi accent, he has spent years traveling in and out of Iraq, both with U.S. military units and on his own outside the relative safe haven of the Green Zone in the heart of Baghdad, where U.S. diplomats and senior military leaders have hunkered down since 2003. In a country where kidnapping has become a source of revenue for criminal gangs and insurgents, and where both tend to view outsiders with suspicion, Rosen has traveled widely as freelance author, photographer, and filmmaker. In particular, he set out to record Iraqi perspectives on their country after Saddam Hussein's ouster.

But Rosen is not like other reporters. Most, such as the *Washington Post's* Anthony Shadid (*Night Draws Near*) and the late freelance journalist Steven Vincent (*In the Red Zone*), have sought to understand and chronicle the experience of the majority of Iraqis. Rosen's objective is different: to explore the motivations of those who seek to advance their agendas through the barrel of a gun, more often than not one aimed at their fellow Iraqis.

Rosen's Iraq is populated with thugs from top to bottom. His tour guides are angry Iraqis engaged in fighting the Coalition, suppressing democracy, imposing their religious views on others, or feeding the rumor mill that exalts their cause at the expense of rationality. He witnesses adolescents being celebrated for their skills with a sniper rifle, and Islamic courts inflicting arbitrary punishment on Iraqis insufficiently committed to the court's view of Islam. In the process, Rosen accurately captures the brutality of war waged by irregulars.

But Rosen's strength, that he reports what he hears and sees, is also one of his greatest weaknesses. Rosen's narrative is principally told through the eyes of those fighting Americans, the Coalition, and the Iraqi government. He accepts their worldview without assessing its veracity or context. And, since people either engaged in the insurgency or sympathetic to it serve as his primary sources, their views and conclusions come through loud and clear.

Other problems abound, including poor editing, factual errors, and, occasionally, intellectual inconsistency. But the main thrust of *In the Belly of the Green Bird* is unequivocal and clear. Quite simply, Rosen identifies with the insurgents who use terrorist tactics, inflicting greater casualties on their fellow Iraqis than



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on the Americans they profess to fight. His work presents a romanticized image of “resistance,” much as John Reed portrayed the Bolsheviks as reacting to the heavy hand of an authoritarian Tsarist regime. The Iraqis suffering at the hands of insurgents and terrorists are almost invisible in Rosen’s narrative. He justifies this failing by declaring his belief that those who were “silent” will not play much of a role in determining Iraq’s future. Fair enough, but the vocal Iraqis now working to build a better future, one in which violence is not the currency of political dialogue, are also absent from Rosen’s discourse.

This is a glaring omission. These Iraqis are not merely future victims waiting for the insurgency to triumph. They are armed and empowered, fighting back for a future in which violence will not be a way of life. Through August 2006, Coalition forces had trained and equipped some 277,600 Iraqi security forces. Roughly one-third of the company-sized security operations conducted in Iraq during the third quarter of 2006 were carried out independently by Iraqi forces. Indeed, between October 2005 and August 2006, Iraqi forces assumed lead responsibilities for providing security in the majority of Iraq’s provinces.

Of course, there are problems with the Iraqi security forces. Corruption, general lawlessness, unprofessionalism and sectarianism are all apparent and widely reported in the West. Heroism, sacrifice, and dedication are also apparent, but not so readily reported outside of Iraq.

To the degree that it reflects what the insurgents see and believe, *In the Belly of the Green Bird* may help us to better understand Iraq’s insurgency. But unfortunately for both the reader and the Iraqi people, the picture that

emerges from Rosen’s depiction is twisted and distorted, as far removed from the reality as the reflection one sees in a fun-house mirror at a second-rate carnival. The real martyrs in Iraq are those willing to sacrifice all for the promise of a better future. It is a shame that Rosen has them confused with the thugs with whom he associates.

