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TRANSCRIPT OF "FILE ON 4"- 'BASRA'

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REPORTER: Kate Clark

PRODUCER: Arlene Gregorius

EDITOR: David Ross

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ACTUALITY OF BUGLES

CLARK: British forces are scaling back their presence in Basra. A month ago they withdrew to the airport from their last base inside the city, and today the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, went to Iraq to announce troop reductions - a fifth of the soldiers to be home by Christmas.

BROWN: The first thing I want to say is that I'm very proud of what our armed forces have been achieving here. I believe they've acted with great courage and professionalism and bravery and I believe that their contribution to the democracy of Iraq has been something that can make us all proud.

CLARK: Forty-one British troops have died in Basra this year alone. Now the Prime Minister has said he wants to give the Iraqi people the opportunity to take responsibility for their own security. But what sort of city will Britain be handing over?

DHIAA: Every person in Basra might feel that he or she is a candidate for murder or assassination. Every party might have its own purpose for executing or killing others.

CLARK: Four years ago Britain invaded southern Iraq, promising liberation. Now people in Basra have told me of assassinations and clashes, as rival hard-line Shi'a militias vie for control of the city. Many people are so frightened, they have fled.

ZUHUR (VIA INTERPRETER): Of course when we say goodbye to everyone we were so sad because we know that this is the last time we saw them. We were crying, we don't want to leave, but we have to do it.

CLARK: Civilians say Basra has become a Shi'a Taliban city. But how could this have happened on Britain's watch?

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY OF BULLETS FIRING

CLARK: The sound of bullets punctuates the theme tune for the latest big hit Iraqi TV drama. It's called New Nationality and it's about people trying desperately to escape from Iraq.

I'm watching it with a family who have themselves fled the British-controlled city of Basra and ended up here in Syria. The parents, Abu and Im Nur, both look exhausted, as they sit with their five children in a barely furnished flat and describe what forced them to leave their country.

ABU NUR (VIA INTERPRETER): On 11th January, I was closing my shop, I was working as a gold maker. I closed my shop at six o'clock in the evening, returned back home. While I was just going in my car, somebody shoot me and they injured me in my hand, like you see in these fingers.

CLARK: This is your left hand, and the thumb is scarred – so three bullets went in here. You can see where they came out on the other side, on the palm. And one in your leg and your thigh?

ABU NUR: Yes.

CLARK: So they wanted to kill you?

ABU NUR: Yes Kalashnikov.

ABU NUR (VIA INTERPRETER): They shoot him with a Kalashnikov machine and shoot him with sixty bullets.

ACTUALITY WITH PHOTOGRAPHS AND NEWSPAPER CUTTINGS

CLARK: That's a picture of the car, you can see the bullet holes on the driver's side of the car. This family left everything – home and business – when they escaped to Basra. Im Nur looks like she hasn't slept properly for months and her hands tremble as she describes the life they left behind. Why did you think it was necessary to leave Basra?

IM NUR (VIA INTERPRETER): Because I was feel that we are not secure, I was afraid about my girls, about my son, about my husband when they get out from home until they return back. I cannot stand the situation there any more so we decided to come here to Syria. We saw a lot of violence, accident happen for our neighbour, like our neighbour, next door neighbour, he has been killed. More than ten peoples from our relatives have been kidnapped, even children.

CLARK: You were worried about your husband, your son and your daughters when they left the house?

IM NUR (VIA INTERPRETER): We locked them up in the home, I never allowed them to get out because of these things. Even the school, we never let them attend any school.

ACTUALITY OF CHILDREN PLAYING

CLARK: More than two million Iraqis have fled their country since 2003 – and most are here in Syria. There's an estimated 700,000 Iraqi refugees living in this one neighbourhood alone, it's called Sayida Zeinab. They're crammed into apartment blocks all around the golden-domed tomb of one of the Prophet Mohammad's

granddaughters. This has been a place of pilgrimage for centuries, but now it's refugees who vastly outnumber pilgrims and locals. Streets have been renamed after Iraqi towns and it's Iraqi music playing at the stands.

I've come here to meet another Basrawi refugee family. They fled after the attempted kidnapping of their teenage daughter, Nadia, as she walked home from school.

NADIA: I was so terrified. So we come to Syria after that.

CLARK: Were there other girls or boys at school who were kidnapped at that time?

NADIA: Yes, a lot of kidnap. There was two or three girls kidnapped in my school.

CLARK: And was it for money?

NADIA: Yes, for money and kill and rape.

CLARK: Can I ask your mum, who do you think did the kidnapping?

MOTHER (VIA INTERPRETER): We don't know anyone who's responsible about my daughter kidnapping, because there is a lot of people who work against the Iraqi civilians, to make this violence, these actions, kidnappings, killing in a way to make an unstable situation inside Iraq.

ACTUALITY OF CALL TO PRAYER

CLARK: The call to prayer signals the end of another day of the Ramadan fast. The streets and markets have emptied as people head home to eat. We're invited to another Basrawi family to break the fast with them. Like the vast majority of the Basra population, they're Shi'a Muslims. We eat from bowls of food laid out on a plastic table cloth on the floor. The oldest grandson, Mustapha, is four – barely as old as the occupation.

MUSTAPHA: [Speaks in Arabic]

CLARK: We want water we can drink, he says. We want oil, we want electricity. We want peace. Mustapha's comments come when he discovers we're British - although he's a bit confused because we're not soldiers. His family are bitterly angry with the British - not the people, his grandmother Im Ahmed hastily explains, but the government.

IM (VIA INTERPRETER): We know that inside your country, you take care even for the animals, but we have this question. Where is the action for the Iraqi civilians? We are human beings, we are not animals, nobody takes care of us, nobody even asks about us.

CLARK: Several members of her husband's family have been killed by militias, but security is not what she wants to talk about. Why did you leave?

IM (VIA INTERPRETER): She said I left Basra because of these conditions, for the water. There was no drinkable water inside Basra, although we are surrounded by water. There is no electricity. If I'm out of propane gas, I have to carry the propane gas pipe and put it on my head and looking for somebody who can sell me one. If I need oil to make some light during the night, I have to search for it everywhere. And it's so expensive. Gas for the car, so expensive and you have to wait for a long line till you have. But you're forced to buy it because there is no electricity and you have to turn on your generator to have your own electricity especially when we have very hot weather. The life there is terrible. We couldn't handle it any more so we left. In simple words, she said, in simple words, the civilians of Basra, they are dead but walking in the streets. They are just dead people walking in the streets.

CLARK: When I'm Ahmed was growing up, Basra was a resort town. With the river, the canals and palm trees, it was known as the Venice of the East. By 2003, it had already been brought low by the Iran-Iraq war, sanctions, wilful neglect by Saddam's regime and the looting which followed the US-UK invasion. Four years on, its problems still feel overwhelming, says the Lebanese journalist, Sam Daghar,

CLARK: I'm moving from asking people about water and electricity to probing more sensitive subjects – like who is carrying out the violence. And I'm encountering an extreme level of fear. Basra is such a dangerous place now that I couldn't visit, and even though I'm speaking to Basrawis in exile or on the phone, where they can speak from the relative security of their own homes, many are still asking for complete anonymity. I spoke to one well known and well respected Basrawi, whom I'll call Abu Mohammed, and he explains why people are so frightened. His words are spoken by an actor.

MOHAMMED (SPOKEN BY ACTOR): There is violence in Basra carried out by mafias. They organise the crime gangs which are spread widely. That's in addition to natural violence - revenge killings and tribal disputes. Every day Iraqis get killed or assassinated. A lot of clerics, or Ba'athists. Many people who are opposed or suspected of opposing the political parties in Basra get killed or threatened and they leave. On a normal day in the morgue, you can find about fifty corpses.

CLARK: Fifty corpses a day?

MOHAMMED (SPOKEN BY ACTOR): This information was given to me by the workers there, but they can't say their names when they give this information.

CLARK: Since the British left their base inside the city, violence in Basra has been greatly reduced, because the main target of the Iraqi fighters – the British army – has withdrawn. But now we can see the Iraqi on Iraqi violence more clearly. Two recent suicide bombs, one anti Sunni, the other anti Shi'a, and two senior clerics assassinated to add to the three hundred clerics already killed this year. It wasn't supposed to be like this. In 2003, when I was in Basra just after the invasion, it was safe. I drove around the city with a female producer. Women, perhaps especially religious women, spoke of their hopes for education, work, even political leadership. How times have changed.

ZUHUR (VIA INTERPRETER): At school, everyone was saying, why don't you become a Muslim? Why is your hair uncovered?

CLARK: Zuhur is a bright nineteen year old wearing jeans and a shirt. She tells me about her lost dreams for the future. She is Mandaean, a small, ancient religion indigenous to Iraq. They're mentioned in the Qu'ran as a people who should be protected by Muslim states, but like Christians, their numbers are now in free fall in Iraq.

ZUHUR (VIA INTERPRETER): Even my teachers were trying to convert me. I was so disgusted, I didn't want to go to school anymore.

CLARK: Even the teachers and even your friends?

ZUHUR: Yes, yes, everyone ...

(VIA INTERPRETER): After the occupation these things happened. We don't know from where they came, the culture has changed. They want us to return to ages ago. You can't do this, go outside, dress like this. You can't go out without a hijab or an abaya, even if you're not a Muslim. I would be killed immediately. Anyone in the street might beat me, if he had a knife he would stab me, if a gun, he'd shoot me. One day, I was in the market with my parents, I was wearing hijab, but a little hair was showing. A man, a stranger, saw me and shouted in my face.

CLARK: The vast majority of Basrawis are Shi'a Muslims. There are minorities like the Mandaeans, but generally the city has escaped the large scale Sunni-Shi'a attacks and Al-Qaeda suicide bombings seen elsewhere. Violence here is largely a family affair, Shi'a on Shi'a. It comes in many forms. At the university, lecturers report a clamping down by Islamists on academic freedoms as well as direct threats to their lives. A professor who sought refuge in Amman in Jordan explains why he fled.

DHIAA: One of my colleagues was assassinated in December 2006. He was kidnapped from his apartment and was torn into pieces. His body was thrown on one of the streets of Basra. He was a good guy, as I know him very well, and I don't see any reason why he should have been killed. In February 2007, the chief of the guards in our project was assassinated as he was coming to work in the company.

CLARK: Did you receive threats directly?

DHIAA: Yes, unfortunately I received a letter with a bullet, threatening me to, either to leave the country or I will be killed. So I felt that I have to leave in order to spare my life and my family's life.

CLARK: Why were you targeted?

DHIAA: Sometimes I am described as a secular Shi'a or as a liberal Shi'a and this is by itself legitimating the execution of somebody when you say that this person is liberal or secular, it is understood by illiterate fanatics as being an accusation that deserves killing.

ACTUALITY OF MUSIC

CLARK: This is one of the latest hits from Basra. It's a song of yearning for the city. A street music seller here in Damascus has flicked through a whole mass of CDs to find it for me. For centuries, Basra has been a great port city and it was famous for its cosmopolitan culture and its minorities – from the Gulf, India and Iran. That started to change in the 1950s, but among Iraqis, the people of Basra are still known as gentle, open-minded people. But if I was in Basra now, I wouldn't be listening to this.

MOHAMMAD: Music is banned, happiness is banned, alcohol is banned.

CLARK: Abu Mohammad again.

MOHAMMAD: Iraqi law doesn't actually ban alcohol, but in Basra, anyone who deals with alcohol - producing, distributing, selling, drinking will be punished and maybe killed. We're not allowed to talk about who's controlling Basra behind the curtains, to talk freely about religion or clerics or discuss their ideas. It's like living under Shi'a Taliban.

CLARK: This man wasn't the only interviewee to describe the current rulers as Shi'a Taliban. Officials in Basra denied there were bans on music or wedding parties or speaking English. Our interviewees said the rules are unwritten, but it makes no difference – if you break them, you get into trouble. They said billboards warn women to cover up. One, which has subsequently been taken down, called on unveiled women to be killed and their bodies left on the street. We wanted to get a response from the British government, but despite repeated requests to three different ministries, the only interview we were offered was with the current British Consul General in Basra, Richard Jones. There are no radio studios on the army base, so he spoke by phone. Basra, it's like a Shi'a Taliban state. Is this the sort of place that the British could have dreamt they would leave behind as they were preparing to hand over to Iraqi civil and security forces?

JONES: I think there are many different experiences in Basra in this regard. I think the conclusion that I would draw is that the level of tolerance, if you like, both political and social and to some extent religious is still not acceptable and this is one of the areas where we would want to see continued progress. I don't think it's quite as black, overall, as your interlocutor implies. There are still people who think and speak in an independent way, but I would agree, I don't think they have as much of a voice as they deserve, and this is something that I think we should continue to work on together with our Basra interlocutors. What we need to be doing is to continue to think very hard and act wherever we can to help empower the Basrawis themselves to get out of the situation which many of them perceive themselves to be in.

CLARK: I think a lot of them are getting out though, aren't they? They're leaving. They're becoming refugees rather than stay in the city.

JONES: A lot are, but a lot are staying, and I don't think we think the population overall has plummeted or there has been less flight. But yes, you're right, I mean a lot of people have looked around and thought maybe I could have a better life and my family can have a better life elsewhere. Again that wasn't possible at all under the previous regime, that freedom to move ...

CLARK: Freedom to flee.

JONES: Freedom to flee if you want to put it that way. But I don't think that that means that we should draw the conclusion that we just shut up shop and stop trying to whatever we can in whatever the right way is to try to enable Basrawis to decide a better future for themselves.

CLARK: So who is in charge of Basra? There are three main political parties and a host of smaller groups, some with elected seats on the provincial council, others not. All are Shi'a Islamist and all have allied militias. The most formidable force on the streets is the Mahdi Army, the militia force which is loyal – or not so loyal – to the powerful young cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr. It's been the main force fighting the British. Christian Science Monitor reporter, Sam Daghar again.

DAGHAR: In the city itself, what I found incredible was how entrenched the militias were into the fabric of the city and into society. For instance, there are billboards everywhere put up by the Mahdi Army, which glorify and pay homage to militiamen killed in fighting with British forces. These people are labelled as martyrs and glorified in the highest form. You just see the influence and power of the Mahdi Army militia everywhere. They are by far the most formidable force on the ground. There was even a victory parade recently after the British forces vacated the palace in the centre of the city, in which hundreds of militiamen paraded the streets.

CLARK: So you have a city where, until very recently the British were nominally in control of patrolling and at the same time actually the forces that were opposed to them were putting up billboards, renaming streets, and in actuality controlling the city?

DAGHAR: Very much so. Their influence is everywhere. The Mahdi Army is the most formidable in terms of numbers. I was told by a security adviser that they number close to seventeen thousand members divided into forty company size military units, with the Mahdi Army having strong influence over the police force. I mean, I'll give you an example. While I was there I wanted to interview the police chief and I wasn't able to because he was being threatened by dozens of angry policemen that he wanted to fire because they were corrupt and beholden to militias, and his tribe had to come out to Basra city to help him to stand up to the threats of the policemen that he wanted to fire.

CLARK: For these parties and militias, Basra is important. It's Iraq's second city, the centre of the oil industry. The city floats on oil, with some of the biggest fields in the world not far below the surface. Basra's oil provides 80% of the Iraqi state's revenues. The vast bulk of crude – well over 90% - oil workers told us is sold legally. But oil products – petrol, diesel and paraffin – are a different matter. The chance to smuggle these is one of the greatest prizes Basra has to offer.

ACTUALITY BY SHATT AL-ARAB

CLARK: This is the sound of the Shatt al-Arab, the great river formed by the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Looking out from Basra's river port, you can see Iran on the far bank. It's from docks on this mighty river oil workers told us that stolen oil is smuggled and carried eighty miles downstream to the Gulf. The rivalry to control this illegal trade is what makes Basra so volatile, says Yahia Sayid, an expert on Iraq and oil at the London School of Economics. And the enormous profits to be made, he says, have an impact on levels of violence nationwide.

SAYID: The pursuit of oil money even as a way of financing the insurgency, with time becomes a goal in and of itself. The criminal activity takes over the political fight eventually. But it's always mixed in, because you need, if you like, the moral justification, the political justification to sustain the interests of your foot soldiers. It's never quite possible to just be a thief.

CLARK: So oil is both what funds the insurgency or funds sectarian violence, but it's an aim in its own right?

SAYID: Exactly. Oil is both a fuel to the conflict and a prize to be won by the winners.

CLARK: One of the problems with an oil economy is that very few people are needed to produce it. That usually means enriched elites and large numbers of unemployed, with people reliant on state patronage to get jobs. Look at Basra and you see it's the militias and parties who now have patronage. Sam Daghar again.

DAGHAR: At the Southern Oil Company, an official told me that they had eight thousand people imposed on them, added to their payroll by militias. They already had a bloated workforce of about thirty thousand, and eight thousand more people were forced upon them by militias.

CLARK: But it's not just in the oil industry where party or militia membership brings advantages.

DAGHAR: Militiamen get jobs in the police force, in the army. They get priority over other people. If you're a militiaman, you definitely get priority over the rest of the population. You get jobs in hospitals, in government institutions, pretty much everywhere. I wanted to speak to a senior surgeon at the hospital and he refused and told me to just go away, I can't talk to you because everybody is watching me and watching who I meet with and I'd be killed if I talked to you. A lot of the support staff and the security at the hospital and big chunks of the management are beholden to the Sadrist Movement or the Mahdi Army itself.

CLARK: It is this infestation of the security services, particularly the police, which people find so worrying, said a well known Basrawi who's under death threats. I interviewed him by phone and his words are spoken by the translator.

ABU AHMAD (VIA INTERPRETER): We are afraid of everyone. We are afraid of the police, we are afraid of the army, we are afraid of militias. We don't feel safe. There's no difference for me between the militias and the police, because simply the police are originally militiamen, because at the beginning, their recruiting wasn't built on a scientific way or in the right way. Believe it or not, now there are police officers and army officers have been recruited after the war. They cannot even read and write. So, I mean, how can I trust those people? They have been recruited by recommendations from the political parties, from the militias.

CLARK: And has anything happened to you or your family from the police or the militias?

ABU AHMAD (VIA INTERPRETER): He says, my close family hasn't suffered from this luckily, but I know friends and people. As example, if you have a civil problem with someone that he owes you money, if you know some militiamen or a policeman, they will go and arrest him and beat him to get the money back, without going to the court or the law, nothing. Just policemen do whatever they wanted to do. To whoever they want to do for him.

CLARK: That's happened specifically to people that you know?

ABU AHMAD (VIA INTERPRETER): Yes, yes, that happened to friends of mine.

CLARK: The police force, which the British helped set up and train, is a source of insecurity. The rank and file and the officers infiltrated by rival militias. How did this happen? We asked the former Coalition Authority coordinator, Sir Hillary Synott.

SYNOTT: A lot of the police simply joined the militias. They were part of the citizenry and the militias and the police force were both routes to influence, to power and to corruption. Did we try and vet them? Yes, we did, but how could we vet people? What essentially we did is, we took a value judgement about a senior officer, whether they were liable to be trustworthy or not, according to how well they answered our questions. Then we asked that officer, well, what do you think about these guys? And he would say, 'Oh he's all right, I know him, he's my family.' So how else could you vet? Look at Saddam's files? Well, they'd been burnt at an early stage. Nor would they have been a very good source.

CLARK: We spoke to two former interpreters in Damascus who were working with the British forces at the time. Luay, who is now in his late twenties, said they warned senior officers about the infiltrations, not just by the Mahdi Army but by Fadhila, the party of the Governor.

LUAY: In 2004, lots of infiltration came from the parties, especially Fadhila and Mahdi Army as well. Lots of people tried to speak to the British about it, but they didn't take it on board.

CLARK: Was that a mistake?

LUAY: Yes, it was a very very big mistake, because now the militias, they've got a very important role in Basra. But if the British stopped them from the beginning, they wouldn't be like this now.

CLARK: What did people think when they saw the British army training the police force, which was full of men who were against the British?

LUAY: People of Basra think the British are supporting the militia.

CLARK: The people think that the British support the militia?

LUAY: Yes, they do.

CLARK: That's astonishing.

LUAY: They said occupation forces, that's what the occupation forces do when they occupy a country.

CLARK: It's difficult to imagine the British could possibly have wanted infiltration into the police force, but they did work with the militias, says the Basra specialist from the Norwegian Institute for Foreign Affairs, Dr Reider Visser.

VISSER: In a sense the British have been neutral. They have allowed some sort of balance of power to evolve between the different militias, but when you have a balance of power between different militias, there are huge segments of the population that have no protection whatsoever, so in allowing that sort of balance of power to evolve, they have also let down those people in Basra who did not enjoy the protection

CLARK: At the same time, the very forces that have been fighting you are also still present in the police force and civilians on the ground say, for example, if you criticise the religious parties, it's the police who might beat you up or who might arrest you. Or if you get into trouble in terms of business activities with the wrong people, it'll be the police who come to get you. So it seems like you've got maybe good leadership now but of a rotten structure?

JONES: Well, I think that's, that's exactly the situation that the leadership are trying to turn round. I think it's a sort of separate situation from the whole question of whether it was right for us to maintain control of the city centre bases. Where I think we're pointing is to a situation and an environment where this new leadership can make the maximum progress in tackling these dark forces within their ranks, and in particular within the ranks of the police. But, you know, I think they would agree with your assessment of the problem and with your interlocutor's assessment of the problem, that they would also go on to say that they're doing something about it and that they need the continued support from their friends, including from experts in the British system, to give them the training and expertise so that they can make maximum effect.

CLARK: For now, the British are pleased that their withdrawal to the airport went smoothly, although it's alleged that only happened because they did a deal with the Mahdi Army and released many of its prisoners. They stress the huge reduction in violence. But many Iraqis fear an all-out civil war between the militias, especially given the British desire to hand over full control to Iraqi security forces. The Norwegian academic, Reider Visser, says trouble is already brewing.

VISSER: It's very likely that there could be a violent outcome, because there is so much to fight for in Basra - the oil installations. This is the core of the Iraqi economy. There's so much at stake here with regard to the oil and we've seen so much internal Shi'ite fighting in parts of Iraq where there's much less at stake, so it's very difficult to imagine that a conflict in Basra could be resolved more easily. Quite the contrary.

CLARK: Could the British actually intervene if the militias start fighting?

VISSER: They could reduce the overall level of violence. Their sheer presence would, to some extent, check this from collapsing into full collapse, I think.

CLARK: Most of the Basrawis we've spoken to for this programme said that British forces, warmly welcomed in 2003, have failed in their mission. Some people are angry, others bewildered by what has happened, believing the army must have wanted to create chaos and violence in their city. But whatever they think of the occupation, virtually every civilian we spoke to wants the troops to stay. They prefer a foreign army to the very security forces Britain wants to hand over to.

ABU MOHAMMAD: The British forces opened the door to the jungle and they let monsters into Basra - the killers who have destroyed civil life, the mafias and the black marketers, smugglers, money launderers, political militias and the non-political militias. I'm asking them to get those monsters out of our city, back to the jungle, before their troops leave Basra.

SIGNATURE TUNE