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Amer al-Roubaie, the MCQ mosque and CSIS during the Gulf War (1990-1991)

The Gulf Within

Canadian Arabs, Racism,
and the Gulf War

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Left to right: Mohammad Amin, a Montreal psychiatrist and head of the Muslim Community of Quebec, and Amer al-Roubaie, an economist, stand outside the MCQ mosque and Islamic elementary school in Montreal. Amin helped Muslim adults and children cope with trauma and harassment caused by the war. Roubaie, a long-time Canadian, was questioned by CSIS, because he is a volunteer at the mosque.

CHAPTER NINE

Staking the Mosques

"The mosque compared to other religious institutions has the least objects in it, you go in and what is there? Nothing. But you can go into a mosque to hide from society. Some people go to bars, we go to a mosque. Why would the security forces target mosques?"

Montreal economist and Muslim activist
Amer Al-Roubaie

During the war, when Muslims were the targets of Canada's security forces, attention was concentrated on their places of worship, the mosques, and on the Muslim equivalent of active church members. These activists are usually considered benign volunteer workers who help make sure that the church functions smoothly. During the Gulf War, however, they were regarded as potential terrorists.

In Montreal, CSIS and the Mounties targeted nine mosques, among them one run by the Muslim Community of Quebec because of its large and politically active congregation. For the MCQ, such targeting was not new. The mosque president had once been shown a file folder by the Quebec government's intelligence service. The folder was full of photographs of parishioners whom the service wanted identified.

During the Gulf War, CSIS decided to target an Iraqi Canadian named Amer Al-Roubaie, an economist and secretary of the mosque committee. Al-Roubaie had earlier laughed off a warning from a colleague that he would likely be questioned. The warning came after a supper at the colleague's home, when the other man

saw a car pull up behind Al-Roubaie's car as the economist left for home.

Al-Roubaie is a small, soft-spoken academic who lives by himself near the mosque and close to Concordia University's Loyola Campus. He has Ph.D. in economics, having completed his thesis on Third World development at McGill University. Each morning, he heads to McGill, mingling with professors, taking on the odd teaching assignment, or spending time in the library doing research for whatever freelance project he has accepted. Although his income is small, it is sufficient for his purposes. He is forty-five years old and a bachelor, which gives him time to spend his afternoons and evenings at the mosque, helping new immigrants or refugees with their paperwork, organizing the MCQ's office, and even undertaking such tasks as fixing the leaking roof.

He is a devout Muslim, but hardly a fanatic: he still attends evening functions with academics at the university and has no hesitation in saying that although he does not regularly drink alcohol or smoke, he may well end up sipping a beer at these parties. Al-Roubaie is probably one of the more popular and respected parishioners at the mosque.

What singles him out is his immense knowledge of Canada and his love for the country — the only one he has known since he left his native Iraq about twenty years ago. When he came here to specialize in economics, he had no desire to settle in Canada because his family is quite well off, with large farmlands on which tenant farmers grow pineapples, grapes, and oranges. But as time went on, and as he moved from university to university and city to city, he soon found himself settled to the point where Iraq became a distant memory. He returned for a visit only once in the early eighties.

Al-Roubaie first came to Fredericton, New Brunswick, a place that he still remembers and often visits. When he arrived, he did not speak a word of English, only Arabic. But that did not stall his academic ambitions. In two years, he was fluent in English. He finished his basic degree there, then moved to Carleton University in Ottawa, before being recommended to McGill for his Ph.D. In the twenty years that he has been here, he has devoted a lot of time to both national politics and the politics and the economics of various Canadian regions, familiarizing himself

with the names of local politicians and following their exploits. He travelled a great deal and made fast friends in different parts of Canada from Halifax to Vancouver. After he had immersed himself thoroughly in Canada, it did not make sense, he said, to just pull up stakes and return home; he had become a full-fledged Canadian and got his citizenship in 1985. Besides, unlike other immigrants, his Canadian pursuits were not economically motivated — his father had enough retirement money saved up, and his brothers all had good jobs.

What attracted him most as a student of economic development was the multicultural nature of Canada, where he could meet people from all over the world, especially the Third World, and learn about their experiences and their homelands. He never did settle down in a teaching job or make a lot of money. "You may say I did not achieve much financially, but that is not my main concern in life at all. Things went fine. I travelled a lot, went to the best places in this country, compared to other people here, even native-born Canadians. People here need a lot of money to drive fancy cars, go to the Bahamas. Not me."

Instead, he has a network of friends spread over North America. If he needs money, they help out. He can travel and visit them for a month or two at a time. Similarly, when they come to Montreal, he moves in with a friend and lets them and their families use his one-bedroom apartment. Having friends such as these is better than an insurance policy, he believes.

In all this time, other than his one three-week visit home, his only connection with Iraq was with its consulate, for about five years between 1979 and 1984, when he worked part-time as an economist and public relations consultant for the Iraqi mission. If the consulate needed help in finding apartments for visitors or in writing letters to government officials or the media or in preparing other publicity material, he would help out. In 1984, when the Iraqis shut down their Montreal consulate, his association with the government of Iraq ended.

Shortly before Christmas, 1990, while the United Nations countdown to war was going on, Al-Roubaie came home one day and found a message on his answering machine. It was a man, who left his name and said he would call again. The next morning, he called and introduced himself. He was from CSIS. He asked Al-Roubaie what he did for a living, and when the Iraqi Canadian

said he was an economist at McGill, the man from CSIS replied: "Oh yes, then you're the person I am after."

He asked Al-Roubaie whether they could get together that day so the economist could answer a few questions. The agent offered to come to his apartment or to meet him at the CSIS office. Al-Roubaie said that since he had to go to the vicinity of the CSIS office to pick up some mail, he would to drop in. He was apprehensive and nervous as he headed downtown. Different questions went through his mind: Why would the spy service seek him out? How much information did they have on him and why? He had done nothing wrong, he was never involved with the police before this, and the meeting would be his first contact in Canada with any kind of a police or security organization. Police and security, the Mukhabarat, are not happy associations for any Middle Easterner.

The interview lasted about an hour. The agent produced several pictures of local and other Arabs and asked Al-Roubaie whether he recognized any of them. Two of them were Iraqi consular officials whom he knew, and he said so. The agent then wanted to know about other Iraqis in Montreal, and although he did not use the word terrorist, it soon became obvious what he was after. Al-Roubaie made it clear that the Iraqi community numbers less than five thousand in Montreal and is almost entirely a refugee one, made up of people who had either run away from Saddam Hussein or left because of the Iran-Iraq war. "They won't get involved in any violence or sabotage, if that's what you're after," he told the agent.

But there were other set questions to answer. The agent wanted to know how Al-Roubaie felt about Canada being part of a war in the Middle East. Then the agent asked whether he supported Saddam Hussein. Al-Roubaie said he was shocked at that question because he had been so cut off from the internal politics of Iraq. "I told him that I could probably give him a better answer if he asked me whether I supported Brian Mulroney because the only contact I have left with Iraq is my family there, I've been here for so long."

About half an hour into the conversation, the agent himself began to get bored with the line of questioning. Apparently, Al-Roubaie, a full-fledged academic who was flying to Washington

the following week to deliver a paper on Third World development, was not the agent's idea of a potential terrorist.

He began discussing economics with Al-Roubaie — the agent himself was a frustrated economist. He had studied at Carleton University in Ottawa and then at Queen's University in Kingston. That subject, of course, touched Al-Roubaie's first love, and they got involved in discussing various economic theories for the next half hour — terrorism, the Iraqi community, and Arabs all seemed to have vanished suddenly. When Al-Roubaie left the building, he stopped for a moment and began to wonder why he had been targeted in the first place. It did not seem to make sense. As he walked back to McGill, he thought about the agent's face, and he knew he had seen the man at the university, in the library and at other lectures and gatherings. He was the academic "spy" detailed to keep a tab on foreign students and professors whom Canada lets in but then has second thoughts about.

He recalled that the agent was at a loss to explain his targeting when Al-Roubaie questioned him in return. "I explained to him that I did not even have a traffic ticket in all my life in this country, I do not have any criminal record, I never had any problems, I travelled this country one end to the other. I have friends in every province of this country, and I have learned so much about its politics, the culture, about the linguistics, about the diversity, about so many other Canadian issues. But he did not have any answer to these types of thing. The Middle East is in turmoil, and there will be more problems there from time to time, and it is disheartening to know that whenever there is a problem over there, you will be the first victim here. I did not end up feeling really comfortable. That is the sad side of this whole issue."

He did not think it was just because he was an Iraqi that he was on CSIS's target list; it was also because he was an activist at the mosque, its secretary, familiar with the parishioners, friends with the Muslims in Montreal. He believes, given several other people who were approached and the types of questions directed at them, that there was a pattern of targeting devout Muslims and activists at their mosques. He believes there is concern in Canada about the spreading Muslim faith. There are about three hundred thousand Muslims in Canada, and their numbers are growing; the next census is expected to place them ahead of the Jews.

For a while, Al-Roubaie thought of leaving Canada and returning to Iraq. He did not think the much vaunted Charter of Rights and Freedoms made sense after what he had gone through. Would he ever be accepted as a Canadian? Wasn't it better to face the primitive security services of Iraq and some other Third World countries rather than the technologically superior one of the West, where even if the spies did not talk to you, they knew your life history through telephone taps, opening mail, and details from other data banks. He believes, with some justification, that given their superiority in information-gathering and spying techniques, modern societies such as Canada are *ipso facto* police states — they don't need to follow you; you are always under their watchful eyes.

He was sad and angry, but then another realization came over him. Although Ottawa had disappointed him, the province of Quebec treated him well. Why should he consider himself a Canadian? And so, in our second and last interview, as we chatted casually over a Greek dinner, he commented: "You know what? I've decided, I am not going to be a Canadian. Since I've spent most of my years in Montreal, henceforth I am a Québécois. In fact, I like the French! We have asked the province for a grant to teach the Muslims at the mosque French. They will all be Québécois!"

CSIS had concluded in its continuing assessment of the war situation that the threat of a terrorist incident in Canada was remote. Moreover, the RCMP was coming up empty handed as it conducted interview after interview. One would have thought that after a week or so, such targeting would have died out, unless, of course, it was motivated by more than information-gathering. Perhaps the security forces were taking their cue from their political masters and the bureaucrats, especially from the Department of External Affairs, which was at the centre of policy-making during the conflict.

Evidence suggests that this was the case. Shortly after the invasion of Kuwait, the federal minister of housing, Alan Redway, who has many Muslims and Arabs in his riding, sought a meeting between External Affairs Minister Joe Clark and six Muslim imams who had specific concerns. He found Clark receptive, but the mandarins in External Affairs were opposed to such a meeting.

They continued to block it, arguing that "it would cause undefined problems."

Eventually, Clark met Imams Said Zafar, Ezz Gad, Abdullah Hakim, Abdul Hameed Gabier, Ahmad Kutti, and Abdul Mohsin Jamil on January 30 for about forty-five minutes. The imams were concerned about the Muslim image in Canada and sought the appointment of Muslims in External Affairs, especially as ambassadors, in order to educate Canadians about Islam.

Clark was blunt. He said he would not appoint a Muslim as an ambassador to a Muslim country. Who would the ambassador be loyal to, Islam or Canada? His top bureaucrats listened quietly, and Clark did not elaborate. The bias in the statement was clear. Would he apply the same rule when appointing Christians to a Christian country or Jews to Israel? If the job of an ambassador is to create goodwill and, presumably, trade links, then what better way than to show the multiracial character of Canada?

A day later, Redway wrote a personal and confidential letter to Clark. The following portions are worth noting:

I am sure that you have sensed from previous communications, meetings and discussions, the deep distrust that Canadians of Muslim origin have for our government. They feel that both their political representatives and the bureaucracy are strongly prejudiced against them, even though many of them are third and perhaps fourth generation Canadians. ... You and I both know that this is ... not government policy. It may very well be the policy of the bureaucracy to treat Canadian Muslims as second-class citizens, but it is not the policy of the Mulroney government ... I hope that you will correct this impression.

Clark never did.

Al-Roubaie's experiences, like those of other Muslims interviewed for this book, suggest that during the Gulf War our security forces often targeted individuals based on their race and religion. While white Canadians could speak out against the war, if Arabs and Muslims opposed it, they became potential saboteurs

and terrorists in the eyes of the security forces. Certainly, nothing in Al-Roubaie's background save his race and his religious activism at the local mosque explains the decision to target him. Traditionally, security forces take their marching orders from their political masters. When high-ranking ministers, such as Joe Clark, question whether Muslims can be loyal to Canada as well as Islam, then it is no surprise that CSIS should target Al-Roubaie. Clark's comments, and the anti-Muslim bias displayed by university-trained senior bureaucrats in External Affairs, strengthen the conclusion that security targeting during the war was racially motivated.