

 **Learn about the Monitor's Treeless Edition** [click here](#)

Try the Monitor's Treeless Edition® and get 21 Free Issues! 

Special Offer: Subscribe to the Monitor for just 43 cents an issue.



Specials > Iraq in Transition
from the March 07, 2005 edition

What Iraq's checkpoints are like

By **Annia Ciezadlo** | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

Editor's note: On Friday, an Italian intelligence officer was killed and Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrena was wounded as their car approached a US military checkpoint in Baghdad. The US says the car was speeding, despite hand signals, flashing white lights, and warning shots from US forces. Ms. Sgrena says her car was not speeding and they did see any signals. This personal account, filed prior to the shooting, explains how confusing and risky checkpoints can be - from both sides.

It's a common occurrence in Iraq: A car speeds toward an American checkpoint or foot patrol. They fire warning shots; the car keeps coming. Soldiers then shoot at the car. Sometimes the on-comer is a foiled suicide attacker ([see story](#)), but other times, it's an unarmed family.

As an American journalist here, I have been through many checkpoints and have come close to being shot at several times myself. I look vaguely Middle Eastern, which perhaps makes my checkpoint experience a little closer to that of the typical Iraqi. Here's what it's like.

You're driving along and you see a couple of soldiers standing by the side of the road - but that's a pretty ubiquitous sight in Baghdad, so you don't think anything of it. Next thing you know, soldiers are screaming at you, pointing their rifles and swiveling tank guns in your direction, and you didn't even know it was a checkpoint.



BACK HOME: Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrena arrived in Rome Saturday, injured after US troops fired on her car.
ALESSANDRA TARANTINO/AP

Today's stories

03/07/2005

[What Iraq's checkpoints are like](#)

[A speeding sedan and a close call for one marine unit](#)

[more stories...](#)

NOTEBOOK IRAQ

[XML What is this?](#)

From our archive

[Trying war crimes: Iraq in context \\$](#)
The capture of Saddam Hussein is only the start. Learn about justice elsewhere.

Other features

[Iraqi women eye Islamic law](#)

[In Fallujah's wake, marines go west](#)

[In Iraq, a clear-cut bin Laden-Zarqawi alliance](#)

[Seeds of nonviolent resistance sown in Iraq](#)

[For Iraqi women, Abu Ghraib's taint](#)

[Democracy from scratch](#)

[Contractors for a new Iraq](#)

[The Crucible: Forging a](#)

SUPPORT THE MONITOR

→ [Help the Monitor.](#)
[Donate now](#) to support independent journalism.

SUBSCRIBE

Subscribe:

→ [Free sample issue](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Apparel

[Buy Shoes](#)

Business Resources

[Search Engine Optimization](#)

Financial

[Car Insurance](#)
[Personal Loans](#)
[UK Car Insurance](#)

Gifts

[Engagement Rings](#)
[Find Florist](#)
[Italian Charm Bracelets](#)
[Italian Charms Sale!](#)
[Necklaces](#)

Home & Garden

[Patio Furniture](#)

Music

[Song Lyrics](#)

Philanthropy

[Give Hope to a Child](#)

Real Estate

[Moving](#)
[Moving Companies](#)
[Mortgage](#)
[Mortgage Advice](#)
[Mortgage Calculator](#)
[Real Estate](#)

Travel

[City Hotels](#)
[Discount Hotels](#)
[Discount Hotel Rooms](#)

Terrorism & Security

A daily update.

Graphics

[Map of Iraq \(PDF\)](#)

[Ethnic/religious groups](#)

[XML](#) [What is this?](#)

SPECIAL PROJECTS



[Behind the barrier](#)



[Iraq weapons inspections](#)



[At the heart of hunger](#)



[September 11 One year later](#)



[Defining Terrorism](#)



[Trail of a Bullet: reports on D.U.](#)



[A Brutal Exit: Battalion 745](#)



[Small Plane, Big Planet](#)

[more projects...](#)

Most-viewed stories:

(for 03/09/05)

03/09/05

[Off-radar tax breaks draw new scrutiny](#)

03/09/05

[Pro-Syria voices push back](#)

03/09/05

[Public schools follow the market, pitch all-day kindergarten](#)

03/09/05

[Dan Rather: a pioneer and a lightning rod](#)

03/09/05

[Signal behind Bolton's nomination to UN post](#)

If it's confusing for me - and I'm an American - what is it like for Iraqis who don't speak English?

In situations like this, I've often had Iraqi drivers who step on the gas. It's a natural reaction: Angry soldiers are screaming at you in a language you don't understand, and you think they're saying "get out of here," and you're terrified to boot, so you try to drive your way out.

'Stop or you will be shot'

Another problem is that the US troops tend to have two-stage checkpoints. First there's a knot of Iraqi security forces standing by a sign that says, in Arabic and English, "Stop or you will be shot." Most of the time, the Iraqis will casually wave you through.

Your driver, who slowed down for the checkpoint, will accelerate to resume his normal speed. What he doesn't realize is that there's another, *American* checkpoint several hundred yards past the Iraqi checkpoint, and he's speeding toward it. Sometimes, he may even think that being waved through the first checkpoint means he's exempt from the second one (especially if he's not familiar with American checkpoint routines).

I remember one terrifying day when my Iraqi driver did just that. We got to a checkpoint manned by Iraqi troops. Chatting and smoking, they waved us through without a glance.

Relieved, he stomped down on the gas pedal, and we zoomed up to about 50 miles per hour before I saw the second checkpoint up ahead. I screamed at him to stop, my translator screamed, and the American soldiers up ahead looked as if they were getting ready to start shooting.

After I got my driver to slow down and we cleared the second checkpoint, I made him stop the car. My voice shaking with fear, I explained to him that once he sees a checkpoint, whether it's behind him or ahead of him, he should drive as slowly as possible for at least five minutes.

He turned to me, his face twisted with the anguish of making me understand: "But Mrs. Annia," he said, "if you go slow, they *notice* you!"

Under Saddam, idling was risky

This feeling is a holdover from the days of Saddam, when driving slowly past a government building or installation was considered suspicious behavior. Get caught idling past the wrong palaces or ministry, and you might never be seen again.

I remember parking outside a ministry with an Iraqi driver, waiting to pick up a friend. After sitting and staring at the building for about half an hour, waiting for our friend to emerge, the driver shook his head.

"If you even looked at this building before, you'd get arrested," he said, his voice full of disbelief. Before, he would speed past this building, gripping the wheel, staring straight ahead, careful not to even turn his head. After 35 years of this, Iraqis still speed up

[E-mail this story](#)

[Write a letter to the Editor](#)

[Printer-friendly version](#)

[Permission to reprint/republish](#)

[Hotel Deals](#)
[Hotels](#)
[Hotel Reviews](#)
[Travel](#)
[Vacation Rentals](#)

Web Services

[Internet Marketing](#)
[Web Directory](#)
[Web Hosting Reviews](#)

MONITOR ARCHIVE

[Purchase articles](#) for as little as 15 cents each.

TREELESS EDITION®

New! [Subscribe](#) to the Treeless Edition!

E-mail Alerts

→ [Environment](#)

→ [Politics](#)

→ [Ethics](#)

→ [More topics...](#)

Sign up now:

Work to Change the World

Organizations committed to making a difference

[Monitor Store](#)

Monitor School Programs featuring

The Great Books Foundation
Readings in American Democracy

Get
32 issues
FREE



when they're driving past government buildings - which, since the Americans took over a lot of them, tend to be exactly where the checkpoints are.

Fear of insurgents and kidnappers are another reason for accelerating, and in that scenario, speeding up and getting away could save your life. Many Iraqis know somebody who's been shot at on the road, and a lot of people survived only because they stepped on the gas.

This fear comes into play at checkpoints because US troops are often accompanied by a cordon of Iraqi security forces - and a lot of the assassinations and kidnappings have been carried out by Iraqi security forces or people dressed in their uniforms. Often the Iraqi security forces are the first troops visible at checkpoints. If they are angry-looking and you hear shots being fired, it becomes easier to misread the situation and put the pedal to the metal.

A couple of times soldiers have told me at checkpoints that they had just shot somebody. They're not supposed to talk about it, but they do. I think the soldiers really needed to talk about it. They were traumatized by the experience.

Traumatic for soldiers, too

This is not what they wanted - *really* not what they wanted - and the whole checkpoint experience is confusing and terrifying for them as well as for the Iraqis. Many of them have probably seen people get killed or injured, including friends of theirs. You can imagine what it's like for them, wondering whether each car that approaches is a normal Iraqi family or a suicide bomber.

The essential problem with checkpoints is that the Americans don't know if the Iraqis are "friendlies" or not, and the Iraqis don't know what the Americans want them to do.

I always wished that the American commanders who set up these checkpoints could drive through themselves, in a civilian car, so they could see what the experience was like for civilians. But it wouldn't be the same: They already know what an American checkpoint is, and how to act at one - which many Iraqis don't.

Is there a way to do checkpoints right? Perhaps, perhaps not. But it seems that the checkpoint experience perfectly encapsulates the contradictions and miseries and misunderstandings of everyone's common experience - both Iraqis and Americans - in Iraq.

Special Offer: [Subscribe to the Monitor and get 32 issues FREE](#)

Links of interest

- Essential background FAQs: [Why is Syria in Lebanon?](#), [Is there a problem with Social Security now?](#)
- [Environment: Bioengineered trees are taking root in China](#)
- [Work to Change the World: Job hunting resources](#)

Most-read stories (for 03/09)

**Subscribe
to the
Monitor
at the
special
low rate
of just
43¢
an issue**

**Subscribe
Here**



- [Off-radar tax breaks draw new scrutiny](#) (03/09/05)
- [Pro-Syria voices push back](#) (03/09/05)
- [Public schools follow the market, pitch all-day kindergarten](#) (03/09/05)
- [Dan Rather: a pioneer and a lightning rod](#) (03/09/05)
- [Signal behind Bolton's nomination to UN post](#) (03/09/05)

 [E-mail this story](#)

 [Write a letter to the Editor](#)

 [Printer-friendly version](#)

 [Permission to reprint/republish](#)

[back to top](#)

[Home](#) | [About Us/Help](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Archive](#) | [Print Edition](#) | [Site Map](#) | [RSS](#) | [Special Projects](#) | [Corrections](#)
[Contact Us](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Rights & Permissions](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [Today's Article on Christian Science](#) | [Web Directory](#)

www.csmonitor.com | Copyright © 2005 The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved.