

Shrink Rap Radio #24, January 31, 2006. Psychological Survival in Baghdad

Dr. Dave interviews Mohammed

(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Dale Hoff)

Introduction: Welcome back to Shrink Rap Radio, the planet's premiere psychology podcast. This is your host, Dr. Dave, coming to you from the San Francisco Bay area. Shrink Rap Radio is the show that speaks from the psychologist in me to the psychologist in you whether you be amateur, student or professional. In a recent show, I shared a few lines from an e-mail that I received from a listener in Iraq. It was exciting to discover a devoted listener to Shrink Rap Radio in that war-torn part of the world. Because Iraq is the focus of so much attention, I thought you might be interested to hear first hand what life is like there now for at least one Iraqi. Certainly, I've been curious to know that for myself. From a psychological point of view, the stress must be enormous. So, I was hoping I might be able to interview my Iraqi listener and, fortunately, he was not only willing but eager. Mohammed, who lives and works in Baghdad has asked to be identified only by his first name. Anything more might prove dangerous for him. Please keep in mind that my slant in this series is meant to be psychological rather than political. The quality of the sound is somewhat spotty but personally I find it a miracle that I was able to Skype out to his cell phone at all. Also, you'll notice three places where the sound quality is quite different. Right after our interview, Mohammed sent me three sound clips, which I've spliced in. Here's Mohammed in Baghdad.

Dr. Dave: Mo, welcome to Shrink Rap Radio. I've gotten used to calling you Mo in our e-mail correspondence back and forth but your name is Mohammed and maybe I should call you Mohammed. I'm thrilled to have you on the show to give me and my listeners a first hand account of what's going on there in Iraq. And, of course, we see news accounts on television but the news may be giving us a somewhat distorted picture and sometimes a very narrow picture of actual events. So, perhaps you could start out by telling us something about yourself in terms of, you know, give us your background in terms of age, education, and I don't know if you're married or not, what type of work you do. Now, I know it might be dangerous for you to identify yourself, so please share only those details that you feel safe sharing with us.

Mohammed: Well, first, I would like to say that I'm very honored to be on your show because I looked at the list of guests that you've interviewed and I see that most, if not all of them, were very famous and prominent figures in the world of psychology and science in general. I am [unintelligible] myself to be on your show.

Dr. Dave: I'm glad to have you here.

Mohammed: Thank you. I'm not married. I'm way over 30 now. I'm about to become 30. I studied computer science, graduated about ten years ago and it doesn't seem like a long time ago. I don't know what to—the image that you're talking about the media is picturing what is happening in Iraq. I don't know if I can give you a precise image myself. I can tell you about what I see and what I feel.

Dr. Dave: Yes. That's, of course, what we're interested in. You know, unfortunately, you're living in one of the world's most troubled hot spots right now and I imagine that this could make day-to-day life very challenging. At the same time, in your e-mails, you've mentioned that you go to internet cafes. So, in some ways, it sounds like maybe life goes on as normal. What's life like there today in terms of—Do you have electricity? Are there cars in the streets and so on?

Mohammed: Well, life is as normal as can be, given the circumstances that we have. Of course, there are a lot of electricity cut-outs. The most thing that we're suffering from is the electricity cuts. Now, the electricity is off for about four and a half hours and on for one and a half hour. It used to be two hours on in the summer and four hours off. And now, it's getting worse and it's expected to get worse by next summer.

Dr. Dave: Oh, that sounds very difficult. What about cars? Are people able to drive their cars?

Mohammed: Yes, of course, and the problem is that there are too many cars.

Dr. Dave: Too many cars?

Mohammed: Yes. We can not accommodate the number of cars that are there in Iraq in general because the streets are very old. They have been built since the fifties or sixties and no development has taken place to expand or make them wider ever since. And after the war, a lot of cars—almost double the number of the cars

that used to be on the street—have entered Iraq. So there are too many cars and the government had to come up with a curfew for the cars, making one day only the odd-numbered cars go out and the other day with the even-numbered cars can go out. It lets fewer cars be on the street to reclaim the problem of fuel consumption because there are too many cars waiting in very long lines in the gas stations just to get fuel and too many cars in the street. So, they made up that plan just to try to solve the problem. And maybe it did something.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. Now, do you have a car yourself?

Mohammed: Not mine, but we have a car in the house.

Dr. Dave: In the house, you do. Okay. Now, your English is very good. How did you learn to speak English so well?

Mohammed: Well, I've had interest in English ever since primary school and I remember when I was in first year in intermediate school that I had a book, a comic book, of "The Adventures of Asterix,"—French, I think, a French author—and I tried to translate it into Arabic. And when I look now at my translation at that time, I laugh at my translation. But, it did me a lot of good and ever since that time, I became better and had better vocabulary and better than my peers and colleagues in every stage of my studies. When I entered college, I began buying English novels and books and I've read about 150 of them.

Dr. Dave: Wow.

Mohammed: Good library.

Dr. Dave: That's great. Now, how are you able to get to work? Do you walk to your work or take public transportation?

Mohammed: Well, it depends on the work. I've been in and out of a lot of jobs lately. But, my latest job, I go on public transportation and it's not that far from where I live. I take one bus.

Dr. Dave: Now, on television, we see nothing but the violence and, you know, sometimes television will focus in, you know, it will focus in on, you know, whatever is very dramatic and so we don't get the big picture. So, I'm wondering how dangerous is it really there in Baghdad?

Mohammed: It is dangerous to go in the street but I call it a random danger because nobody can guarantee that a bomb or a car bomb would not go off when you pass by it. Random, that means that there isn't somebody looking for you particularly just to kill you. It is just random. It happens by bad luck to be nearby.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Mohammed: But there is, of course, there is violence all over Iraq and it is very unfortunate.

Dr. Dave: Yes it is. Have you, yourself, lost any family or friends to the violence?

Mohammed: Not a family member, thank God, but someone I know. I can tell you about it if you'd like.

Dr. Dave: Sure. Go ahead.

Mohammed: He works for a fashion shop and he goes a lot—travels a lot out of Iraq just to get the designs needed for the shop and we considered him lucky to be able to travel. It is not that easy. Although it's now easier than it used to be in Saddam's reign, but still not that easy. When he was coming back from Turkey near a checkpoint, it seems that a guard or some [unintelligible] impulsive soldier fired a round at the van or car that he was in and there were a lot of passengers in the car but only he was shot in the heart.

Dr. Dave: Oh, my goodness. What a tragedy. So, how are you able to cope psychologically in a situation where the violence is so random and you never know what's going to happen? How do you cope with that yourself psychologically?

Mohammed: Well, I try not to think about it a lot. I don't hear the news every day because whenever I hear the news or watch the news, I see a lot of tragic and a lot of bad news and it makes me very sad so I try to keep my mind off it by concentrating on my work or doing the things that I like. I spend a lot of time on the internet and playing video games.

Dr. Dave: Yeah. That makes sense to me that you would find things to focus on other than the violence and to kind of keep your mind occupied. I'm sorry if this interview for a little while puts your mind on the thing that you would rather not be thinking about.

Mohammed: But there are good news. I mean, for example, today happens to be the first anniversary of the day that's considered a national holiday here in Iraq. It is the anniversary of the first democratic election that was held in Iraq. This is one of the greatest accomplishments.

Dr. Dave: And are people celebrating this holiday? Are they happy about that?

Mohammed: Well, the people that I've seen so far didn't remember it but they are happy because it's a holiday. They don't have to go to work.

Dr. Dave: Has the violence there affected your sleep or your dream life? You know, as a psychologist, I'm interested in those kinds of things.

Mohammed: Not the violence as much as the lack of power, especially in the summer when it goes off for four consecutive hours and you can't sleep at night.

Dr. Dave: Because it's too hot?

Mohammed: Yes. It's very hot in Iraq.

Dr. Dave: Yes. I see. And how do other people that you know cope with what's going on over there? How do your friends and your family cope with the violence?

Mohammed: You don't see it everywhere you go. I mean, there are, of course, the parts of Baghdad or cities anywhere in Iraq when a car goes off that the security forces come and cut the street and prevent everybody from getting into that place. And that is what you see. But other than that, we go to work and teach our children and my nieces and nephews go to their schools and study and go a lot of distance in that, going and coming back. So, life is as normal as can be.

Dr. Dave: Yes, yes. Just to get some sense of how often these random acts of violence happen close to you, how often would you hear a bomb go off? Would it be every day or once a week or—?

Mohammed: Well, we hear these sounds several times a day.

Dr. Dave: Several times a day. Wow.

Mohammed: Yes. And sometimes they're near; sometimes they're far.

Dr. Dave: Okay.

Mohammed: I'd like to say something about your idea about the—you thought that if the United States pulls out of Iraq, would that make things better or worse?

Dr. Dave: If the U.S. were to leave Iraq, would it make things better or worse? Yes. I was wondering because many of us in this country were strongly opposed to the U.S. being there and many think we should get out as soon as possible but at the same time, many of us fear that if we leave too soon, it might lead to even worse chaos. So, if you feel comfortable talking about it, how do you feel about the United States being there and how soon do you think we should leave?

Mohammed: Well, I can't say how soon because it depends on how soon the Iraqi forces will be ready. Because I know that if the U.S. forces pull out now, we'd be in a very hard situation because the terrorists would be stronger and this month, I've seen some development in the—I'm not sure this is a terrorist or not, but I think it is the only logical explanation—I didn't hear it on the news but I saw it and a friend of mine was at home as well. We've seen anti-aircraft artillery fired. This didn't happen [unintelligible] because as soon as the war was over, the Americans began taking those cannons or guns from over the high buildings. So, how can anyone put an anti-aircraft gun on a building in January, 2006 and fire at an airplane? This is something amazing. I don't think that the U.S. would do such a thing because we know that it is—we are very used to the sound of that anti-aircraft gun and it sounds—it is Russian-made. So why would the U.S. troops try to use a Russian-made gun?

Dr. Dave: So, you think you're hearing the terrorists using anti-aircraft guns on top of buildings there?

Mohammed: Yes. It's amazing. I mean, someone suicidal would have to do that because they would fire a rocket at that building in a matter of minutes. Who would be stupid enough to go and install an anti-aircraft gun on a building and fire at airplanes and not expect a rocket within minutes.

Dr. Dave: Yeah.

Mohammed: So to continue on the idea of the terrorists, if they were able to have anti-aircraft guns installed on buildings with the presence of the U.S. army in Iraq, so what are they capable of if the U.S. pulls out? I mean, we have seen them able

to take over entire cities and control them. That would definitely lead to a civil war if the U.S. pulls out and maybe they would be able to rule just like Taliban ruled in Afghanistan and I'm sure nobody in the world would like that to happen except for the terrorists themselves.

Dr. Dave: What's the mood in Iraq now that the elections have taken place? There were elections just recently. And what's the mood as a result of that?

Mohammed: Well, we're waiting for the new government to come and be announced. What can I say? We can only wait and hope that they will do better.

Dr. Dave: Yes.

Mohammed: It will be essentially the same government. The same rulers are—the rulers are the same. Only a few Sunnis have shown—will get some seats. And I would also like to talk about the mentality of the Arabs or the Iraqis. In general, the conspiracy theory holds a very big portion of the minds of the Arabs in general, especially here in Iraq. I'll give you an example. The number announced by the U.S. government or the military about the casualties and the mortalities, they don't believe in that allegation. They say the number is far, far more than it is announced. They say there is no way that could be true. And when I thought about it, I found that it is practically impossible for the U.S. government to lie about that because it would be a huge scandal if they were discovered that they were lying. For example, I would like to ask you about that, is there some kind of memorial or monument in the Department of Defense where they would write the names of all the casualties and victims of war and anyone would be able to count the names and know how many casualties there are? Do you have such a thing? I think there is. And when I expressed this idea to my friends, they weren't interested in hearing it and they were happy with the thoughts that they had.

Dr. Dave: You mentioned hope. What is your hope for the future? What are you hoping for?

Mohammed: Do you mean for myself or for Iraq?

Dr. Dave: Both.

Mohammed: Both. Okay. Well, I hope that I can find a job outside Iraq and get away from this mess because life is really becoming difficult here. For Iraq, I can only hope that the new government do what it should do to eliminate the dangers that we are living with here.

Dr. Dave: Mohammed, I'm wondering if, as a Muslim, if there are ways in which your spiritual beliefs and practices help you to cope psychologically with the terrorism that's going on there in Baghdad?

Mohammed: Well, as I believe, the role of religion, in general, is to help people be close to our creator and when a believer holds that thought—that there is a power beyond us and that is controlling everything in the world and can make our conditions better if we do things we are supposed to do—then this would be the positive idea that would make people live through their trouble and be patient until a solution comes out or they would be able to come up with a solution as happened with the three decades that Saddam had ruled. Of course, our belief had helped us to pass through that period and is still helping us with the troubles that we are facing today.

Dr. Dave: What else would you like people to hear about the situation there?

Mohammed: Well, I hope that people in Iraq can feel how much love and support the American people have for them. I have seen that first hand in many of my friends that I write to and friends that I have talked to and they are very supportive and caring. They are very good people, I mean, each and every one of them. Even if it was not such a good person, he was still caring and he was still supportive.

Dr. Dave: Well, that's wonderful to hear.

Mohammed: Yes. The unfortunate thing is that we don't see how much love—how much we are loved by the Americans. I mean, all I see from the people around me—not my family, I mean but the acquaintances and some of my friends—I see hate—hatred for the Americans and that's very unfortunate because—the people that I am comfortable talking to them and telling them about my views and how I see all that love towards us, I can't get them to see the things the way I see it.

Dr. Dave: Why do you think you see things differently than they do? Why is it that you have such a positive attitude towards the Americans and they don't?

Mohammed: Well, maybe because I have seen those and one of my previous jobs, I've worked with Americans and I've seen how good people they are. And I've seen some activists. They were in our neighborhood. They lived right through the war and after it for a couple of months. And I got to sit with them and talk with them and later e-mailing them when they got back to the U.S. and I've seen all that love, but a lot of people didn't. They weren't so lucky to be able to communicate and see first hand all that support and love.

Dr. Dave: Yes. Perhaps it's your knowledge of English that has helped with that communication as well. Well, Mohammed, I really want to thank you for being willing to share your own first hand experience with us here and my own hope and I'm sure that others listening to this program is for your continued personal safety and health and for that of your family and also for an end to the violence over there.

Mohammed: Thank you, Doctor.

Dr. Dave: Yes and maybe we can have you back on sometime in the future. If there's more that you'd like to share, it would be great to have you back on here. So, thanks a lot. It's been wonderful. And thank you for listening to the show. I was so surprised and pleased to discover that I have a listener in Iraq.

Mohammed: Well, it is a great show. I enjoy it a lot.

Dr. Dave: Well, tell all your friends. I'm trying to grow the listenership.

Mohammed: I will.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Okay, well, we'll stay in touch then via e-mail. Thanks again.

Mohammed: Thank you, Doctor.

Dr. Dave: Okay. Goodbye.

Dr. Dave: Well, that's our interview. I have to say I feel humbled by my contact with Mohammed. I find myself somewhat at a loss for words. It's hard to fully reconcile the different realities of me in the relative safety and comfort of my California home and him in the midst of daily car bombings in Baghdad. And yet, we're able to sit together and share our humanity here in cyberspace. It's a miracle,

a mystery and a tragedy all rolled into one. Given all the anger and hatred in that region, Mohammed strikes me as an oasis. His contact with peace activists and other Americans there has led him to feel that America sends love and is trying to help and, indeed, everyone I know wishes only peace and freedom for the Iraqi people. I think Mohammed's attitude must be a difficult one to hold, though, in the midst of so much anger and fear. It is said that a thief only sees another man's pockets. Mohammed only sees love from us, I think, because of the love in his own heart. If you feel at all touched by Mohammed's story and would like to reach out to him, I encourage you to send me voice clips for him or leave voicemail for him on our message line at 206-888-2746. I will see that they are played on a future show and also forward them to him. I'm struck by the potential power of Podcasting for citizen-to-citizen diplomacy and understanding. If Shrink Rap Radio were played on a major San Francisco 50,000 watt station, Mohammed and I would most likely never have met but the evolving web and Podcasting has the potential to bring us all together and hopefully increase mutual understanding. As always I love hearing from listeners. Please e-mail me at Shrink@ShrinkRapRadio.com. Our show notes you can find at www.ShrinkRapRadio.com. Or you can leave voicemail for Shrinkpod on Skype or Gizmo Project. And, as I mentioned earlier, we also have a phone in the U. S. where you can leave voicemail and that number again is 206-888-2746. Stay tuned for the Podsafe music selection right after our closing theme music. You will find a link in our show notes to the Podsafe artists. If you like their music, I encourage you to find them on iTunes and support their music. We have the *Reverse Engineers* performing their song "Sunshine with the Shade." To me, these lyrics remind us that there's light to be found in the darkness. Even in the darkness of war-torn Iraq, there is the light of friendship, brother and sisterhood, love and hope to be found. That's it for now. This is Dr. Dave saying, "It's all in your mind."