

Inside Iraq's Unusual Surveillance Game

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By Larry Kaplow

Every Ramadan, in neighborhoods around Baghdad, groups of men face off in the streets. But they are engaged in a battle of wits, not arms, as they play a game called "mahaibis" or "little ring." One team cloaks itself behind a large cloth and hides a ring in the fist of one of its players. Then they all sit, their clenched fists on their laps, as a member of the opposing team tries to guess which player holds the ring and which hand it's in. He (the teams are almost always all-male) has a few minutes to scan each face, looking for telltale signs of nervousness or artificial nonchalance.

The searcher moves with swagger and showmanship, slapping the hands of those he eliminates from consideration among the dozens there to confound him. If he's wrong, and dismisses someone who actually holds the ring, the hiding team gets a point. If he's right, he continues the search to the cheers of his partisans, employing bravado and confusing banter to shake his adversaries' nerves. When he finally settles on his choice, he'll grab the suspect hand in a dramatic flourish. If he's chosen correctly, his teammates exult; they then get to hide the ring and try to win points by baffling the other team's designated hunter.

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America might have had a less perilous time in Iraq if its diplomats and soldiers had come armed with the kind of skills Iraqis learn from childhood in this holiday game of subterfuge. Iraqis who are good at it use their uncanny powers of observation to read opponents' faces and gestures in divining, quite literally, who is hiding something.

Players claim the game is uniquely Iraqi and originated in Baghdad. It's usually played outdoors, often around cafes, where people gather once the day's heat subsides. Neighborhoods send teams to play each other. The game largely disappeared during the mayhem of the last few years, when crowds were common targets. Last year, as mahaibis started to make a comeback, Iraqis claimed several spectators were injured and killed at one game by a U.S. helicopter strike. The military said the target was a mortar team in the area. The tradition moved inside, kept alive in television studios that broadcast the matches accompanied by trumpet-and-drum ensembles, lively ringmasters calling the action, and corporate sponsors. Reporters worked the sidelines, interviewing contestants during breaks in the game.

One television channel this year brought together teams from the Sunni district of Adhamiya and Shi'ite Kadhamiya. The match was held at night on a

bridge over the Tigris River connecting the two areas; jubilant crowds turned out, monitored by Iraqi security forces. The game is popular with both sects and announcers touted the show of brotherhood.

Iraqiya, the government satellite channel, held nightly matches in a month-long tournament. At the finals, stars from around the league showed up; some described their strategy to NEWSWEEK. They talked about reading faces. "The eyes," stressed Adil Al-Kayisi, pointing to his own. The 66-year-old retired Air Force colonel says he honed his skill over the course of 50 years in the game. A good player, he said, watches the opposing team even before the rounds begin, memorizing his rivals' normal mannerisms so he can discern anomalies once the action starts. Someone clenching the ring might get fidgety when he's normally calm, or vice versa. Players also scout opponents in other matches, watching to see if a rival team tends to pick the same person as ring-bearer time and time again. Usually, they guess wrong and the hiding team gets a point. But considering the odds, the ring-pickers choose correctly with uncanny regularity—often singling out the right man, if not always the right fist, amid groups of 30 or more. One captain claimed he had recently found the ring in a crowd of 207 people. (Like a pickup basketball game, the teams can agree ahead of time how many points are needed to win—say 11, or 20, depending on how many hours the teams wish to play.)

Psych-outs are considered fair play. In one round in the finals last week, the searching player, whom the announcer billed "the black ghost," paced in front of the hiding team and commanded in a resonant deep voice, "Look up at me. I am looking at faces, not at fists." The mind games are sometimes eerily reminiscent of interrogation techniques. The concealing men, usually keeping their expressionless faces toward the ground, looked similar to Iraqis swept up in raids by U.S. troops, who have picked up more than their share of the wrong guys in their struggle to distinguish the guilty from the innocent.

But the game is great theater. The tension builds as each minute ticks away. As the searching player rules out opponents successfully, his teammates effusively shout cheers and suggestions.

In the finals, a team from the Dora neighborhood took on perennial champion Kadhamiya. The prizes were mobile phones for the winners sponsored by AsiaCell, one of Iraq's big telecom companies. Between rounds, the Kadhamiya side pumped itself up with the Shi'ite chant, "May God bring praise and

peace upon the Prophet and his descendants" and "Kadhamiya is our mother and father!" Dora's "black ghost," a man in his 50s, knelt in front of a young Kadhamiya player he suspected of bearing the ring and schooled him with cocky banter. "A hero," he boasted, "will grab the hand LIKE THIS!" With that, he seized the man's right-hand fist. He got the right

guy, but the wrong fist. "It is not 'like this,'" the younger player yelled, as the two men rose to meet face-to-face. "And you are NOT a hero!" One point was awarded to Kadhamiya. His teammates rushed in for hugs and congratulations, as the band began to play.