

## **Iraq: The Accidental Prisoner**

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An Iraqi's tale of an odyssey through war zones, trying to reach the West but ending up in Guantanamo.

As a young man in Iraq, I longed to live in the West. Yet when I finally came within reach of the free world, it was no longer as a free man.

The quest to escape my homeland ended with my imprisonment by the United States military at Guantanamo Bay. I spent eight years there, followed by several months in jail in Baghdad when I was repatriated, before I was finally freed.

Today, I live at liberty in the country I spent my youth trying to flee. As I drive around my home city, Baghdad, I ask myself whether I have been treated fairly. Perhaps I was wrong to try and leave my family behind in the first place.

I grew up with reckless desires and whimsical dreams – I wanted to live in Europe, and to date a beautiful, blonde woman; I wanted a job and a car. My family was poor and I wanted to help them buy a house.

My experiences have taught me to be patient. I have learnt that an Iraqi wandering abroad is like a ball flung around in different directions, from one misfortune to another.

I was born in 1974 in southern Baghdad. When I was six years old, my uncle was executed for links to a banned Shia religious party, the Dawa. The party was founded in Iran and its members were regarded as traitors by the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein, which was suspicious of Shia Arabs and spent much of the 1980s at war with Iran.

My uncle's execution plunged my family into a state of fear. The security forces searched our home. My father seemed to be lost in a vast, black sea, perplexed about how we were to survive, and worried for his own safety.

At the age of 12, I started working part-time. At first, I helped mechanics fix cars. Later, I took to the streets, selling cold water, cigarettes and juice to support my family.

After finishing technical school, I was conscripted into the army. Military intelligence had been briefed about my uncle, and I was constantly intimidated, interrogated and insulted. Faced with this hell, I decided to desert and join the opposition.

It was 1995, and Iraq was under international sanctions as a result of its invasion of Kuwait. I set off for the semi-autonomous Kurdish north, where opponents of Saddam could operate relatively freely.

However, I was arrested en route when the security forces stopped me and discovered I was carrying a copy of my uncle's death sentence. I had hoped to use the document to prove my credentials as a dissident once I reached the offices of the United Nations or an opposition party.

I was tried as a deserter and sentenced to death by firing squad. My family sold their most valuable possessions to bribe the judge, and the sentence was reduced to a year's imprisonment.

Back in the military, life was even harder, as I was now stigmatised as a deserter. My family borrowed money from relatives to obtain a forged document that said I had been demobilised. I used this to procure an Iraqi passport, and in 1998, I crossed the border into Jordan.

My search for work took me to Libya, Syria and eventually to Turkey – the gateway to Europe.

The Turkish authorities arrested me and sent me to northern Iraq. After another failed attempt at crossing through Turkey, I changed tack and set off eastwards through Iran. I thought that with luck, I would be able to get to Russia, or perhaps travel by sea from India to Australia.

I lived as a vagabond in Iran and Pakistan, sleeping rough and scavenging for food. My family lost touch with me.

Eventually, a friend suggested I go to Afghanistan for work. I'd never heard of Afghanistan, but I didn't think twice about going. I had found it impossible to find employment in Pakistan, where Iraqis seemed to be viewed with distrust.

The border crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan was a sight to behold – a lone policeman, sitting on a chair with a stick in one hand and a hashish cigarette in the other.

In August 2001, I made my way to Kabul along with a group of other homeless Arabs. We were given shelter by some men who appeared to be very religious. They hired me as a driver to ferry their fighters around.

The work was unpaid and it felt as if I was a captive. I was regarded with great suspicion by my employers, perhaps because of my Shia origins. They were very different to me – I could not understand why they did not shave, while they didn't understand why I hadn't grown a beard.

Soon after I came to Afghanistan in 2001, the radio broadcast news of the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York.

The Arabs handed me over to a group of Afghans, who promptly sold me on to the American military.

I was initially relieved to see the Americans, as I felt they would believe my story and grant me asylum.

Instead, they sent me to Guantanamo Bay.

Many of my fellow-prisoners there were hard-line Sunnis who regarded Shia Muslims as apostates. They threatened me because of my faith, throwing food at me and cursing Iraq loudly, because most of its population is Shia.

I spent a lot of time in solitary confinement because of the way other prisoners behaved towards me. I also developed a friendly relationship with some of the guards. A Turkish-American officer gave me books, and a female soldier shared her cigarettes.

Over the years, I taught myself good English. During a military hearing held by the Americans, I asked for the official interpreter to be dismissed because I knew he was not translating what I was saying accurately.

One evening, I was playing cards with some American guards when the extremists started shouting abuse at me from their cells. I did not share their religious vocabulary, so I responded in the only way I could – by blowing a raspberry at them. Everyone started laughing, the American soldiers and the prisoners.

I guess I am easily amused. Even when I was being interrogated by the Americans, I kept recalling images from an Egyptian comedy film about a witness who knows nothing.

Since I am Shia, I think ridiculous that I was imprisoned by the Americans together with Sunni extremists. I still don't know whether to laugh or cry about the years I spent there.

The rules in Guantanamo were strict, but as long as you obeyed them, you did not get into trouble. On the streets of Baghdad today, no one knows what the rules are any more. There is danger everywhere.

I no longer have wild fantasies about the future. I am a realist now. But my family is still poor, and they still don't own a home. I still dream of the day when I will not have the landlord at my door asking for the rent.

**Hussein Latif is the pseudonym of an Iraqi man captured in Afghanistan in late 2001 and subsequently taken to the Guantanamo Bay detention facility. He was cleared for release in 2006 but repatriated to Iraq only in 2009. He was interviewed by IWPR's local editor Mohammed Furat. IWPR-trained reporter Adnan Abdul Hussein also contributed to this story from Baghdad.**

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