

Opinion

Hearing Iraq's women

Lynne Minion
OPINION



It was a little too late for second thoughts, standing as I was at the British Airways check-in desk at Sydney Airport. "Where are you going?" the woman behind the counter asked, indifferently. "Iraq, actually," I replied. "To do aid work," by way of explanation.

To my surprise it was then that the woman behind the counter began to cry and, taking my hand, said, "Thank you, for what you do."

It was unnerving, to be honest, especially as she may have been thinking I should cash in the return leg of my ticket. Still, I couldn't allow myself to consider the outlandishness of my quest or the danger in my destination. My principles were drawing me there. Logic had no place in such contemplations.

Anyway, it had seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to do, heading off to Iraq. No place, surely, was too wretched for humanitarianism, and no people should be abandoned to rebuild what we'd bombed, I figured. So soon I was hurtling towards the war zone, Babylon.

Two years after the invasion, the country had just held its first post-Saddam Hussein elections, so it seemed like a fascinating time to be entering the place to me, troubled though it was.

It was too dangerous to fly into Baghdad, which is why I was travelling overland from Turkey, alongside the Syrian border.

At the same time, the ransom for foreigners was set at an undeniably lucrative \$US10 million. Despite the risk, though, I was resolute in my belief that an infidel, a blonde female infidel at that, could help in the cradle of civilisation. Inshallah.

Deposited into Iraq, I was met by a handsome, cheeky local security escort, Dyari, and together we drove towards the northern city of Sulimaniyah, about 650km from Baghdad and 160km from Iran, as he happily pointed out the tourist spots along the way, in between the checkpoints. And during the rather scenic trip he turned to me and asked why an Australian had come all that way: "It is far, why do you have this interest in Iraq?"

"Because we're the deputy sheriff," I joked, unsure of a more plausible rationale.

"You have no problems in your country?" he asked. Well no, not really, not by comparison, we prefer to fight our wars elsewhere, I thought.

For the next couple of months I lived in a room in a hotel with an alleged four stars in a rating system that was clearly contextual. I was accommodated on the fourth floor because it was harder for a grenade to be pitched that high. Even still, my windows were handily shatter-proof and, for additional comfort, Peshmerga soldiers carrying AK-47s patrolled the grounds. These were luxury amenities in those parts.



At night I'd find myself standing at the window of my fortified room, watching a brightly lit Ferris wheel nearby go round and round, a sight I'd never imagined I'd see in a place such as this. To me it signified hope.

Each morning I would wake to the call to prayer, its beautiful wail echoing through the streets, drawing the men towards it and into the city's mosques. In the evenings I would eat in the city's restaurants, sometimes screened away from the men-only sections, sitting behind the potted palms.

And by day I would work with local journalists and edit an online publication that told stories about the conditions for Iraqis, not those of the Western occupying forces. And every now and again, a translator would come to my desk to say that a woman was waiting outside, that she wanted to speak to me.

In a place where many women can't talk to men about their personal struggles, they came to speak to the Australian woman journalist and they asked me to give them a voice.

They told me about the little girl who was dragged into a house and held down on the kitchen table where her clitoris was removed using a dirty knife, without anaesthetic. They told me about the woman who had burned herself alive to escape the shame of divorce, whose ex-husband had instructed her to make sure she did it out in the backyard. They spoke of women paying up to \$US400 for backyard "hymen reconstructions" to protect them from honour killings. Meanwhile, the local women's rights campaigner, Ala Noori Talabani, would wear a bullet-proof vest for protection.

So if the pen is mightier than the

sword, could it help these women to have their experiences told to readers worldwide? Regardless of lofty intentions, can words achieve anything when the powerful won't hear?

This was no peacekeeping mission, after all. The occupying forces with their Humvees and heavy weaponry, whose soldiers were said to be there to liberate the population, did little to liberate the women, quite the contrary. In addition to the estimated one million killed since 2003, about 4.5 million Iraqis have fled their homes, while more than one million widows and three million orphans have been left behind. Desperate women now beg in the streets.

But in July, Australia's last batch of troops were withdrawn, their job done. Ten years after East Timor's vote for freedom from Indonesia ended in a bloodbath, we have 650 troops there. And while our aid to Iraq this financial year will top \$44.7 million, Indonesia will get \$462 million in assistance. It all depends on the geopolitical stakes, it would seem.

It's no surprise, then, that in Babylon hope can struggle to survive. At least when mine expired I could pack up my pretty principles and come back to a fortunate place.

Although before I did so, I asked Dyari to take me for a ride on the Ferris wheel.

And it was from the top of a melancholy ride that I surveyed a dusty, brutal place. One in which so many of Iraq's women were left to endure in silence. Because no one seems to hear their stories at all.

Lynne Minion is a staff reporter.



More than one million widows and three million orphans have been left behind.

Battle scars: A female US soldier conducts a security check on a woman collecting compensation payment for war widows in Iraq in 2003. Photo: REUTERS

WORLD VIEW



KILLING CIVILIANS

On Monday, 28th September, more than 150 civilians protesting the candidature of [President] Camara in January's election were killed by soldiers while about 1253 sustained injuries. The event in Guinea follows the dangerous pattern of sit-tight leaders in Africa. They are always arranging elections so as to perpetuate their stay in office. The opposition in Guinea has called for foreign intervention to save the country from imminent descent into anarchy but Camara has vowed to fight any foreign troops deployed to Guinea while he shamelessly refuses to accept responsibility for the massacre of civilians.

Hakeem Jamiu

Nigeria's Daily Independent

Daily Times

WHAT IS INDEPENDENCE?

It seems to me that our so-called IFP [independent foreign policy] has always been reactive: we look for one only when the US loses interest in us. I give you two examples: if it is in our national interest to shun the US, then why did General Zia-ul-Haq eagerly welcome American money and arms, and why was Pervez Musharraf so desperate to have Bill Clinton spend just a few hours in Islamabad on his trip to India? Anyway, in the global village of today, what does an IFP mean? Is it not now possible... to be friendly with the US, China, our Muslim brothers, and even Russia?

Munir Attaullah

Pakistan's Daily Times



JAMAICAN BRAIN DRAIN

When it is posited that some 60 per cent of our best-trained and -educated people migrate each year, then the picture becomes even more grim. But that is the reality. So those Labourites who continue to huff and puff, trying to blow down the house of reason, had better think twice because it is not just a matter of opting for the blame game or becoming a party apologist. It is now boiling down to a question of why any well-thinking citizen would want to... live in a country where he or she does not feel safe anymore, where opportunities for economic advancement [are] a rarity.

Lloyd B. Smith

Jamaica Observer



I WAS WRONG

OK, it was wrong of me to say last week that we should deny health care to Republicans except for aspirin and hand sanitizer, and thank you to the many readers who kindly took me to task. It was so wrong. And I withdraw the idea that death panels should circulate through red states searching for the obese and slow afoot, the wheezy and limpy, spray-painting orange stripes on their ankles, marking them for future harvest. Even people who are crazed by the thought of a president with three vowels in his last name deserve to be treated with dignity, and shot with tranquilizer darts by game wardens.

Garrison Keillor

Chicago Tribune