

LAYERS OF TRUTH AND LIFE IN IRAQ: Out of the War Zone After 4 1/2 Years, a Times Reporter Looks Back on the Disguises of Reality it Took to Get to the Story and Survive

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The young man with the AK-47 at a checkpoint in the Triangle of Death ordered us out of the car the moment he realized I was a foreigner. A flat gray sky closed in. Dust and diesel exhaust filled the hot air. He led us into the desert, over scrub brush and cigarette butts, toward a grizzled man in a wooden hut.

"And who is he?" the older man asked my Iraqi colleague and interpreter, Raheem.

I had repeatedly promised my bosses, my colleagues, my family and my wife, Delphine, that I wouldn't take big risks. But here I was in the early summer of 2006 in the middle of a lawless desert between Baghdad and Najaf that had swallowed up hundreds of Iraqis and not a small number of foreigners. I was speaking to a man who acted like a cop but looked like he could have been an insurgent commander, the head of a kidnapping ring or a death squad leader.

We were in a mostly Shiite Muslim part of the country, so I stuck to my cover story: I was an Iranian headed to Najaf, one of the thousands of Shiite pilgrims who make their way there each month to pay their respects at the shrine of Imam Ali.

He demanded to see my passport. To my surprise and terror, he thumbed through it. Then he calmly looked up and asked, "Where's your entry stamp?"

I had no answer. I had entered Iraq with my U.S. passport, which I wouldn't dare bring with me on the road. I froze.

Since first arriving in Iraq 4 1/2 years ago, first as a freelance reporter and then as the Los Angeles Times bureau chief, I had kept up the pretense that I was playing it safe.

Now that I am out of Iraq, I can begin to be honest.

For years, I had swaddled myself in layers of half-truths: I was an Iranian heading to the shrine cities. I was an average Joe from the Midwest who liked to go canoeing in the summer. I was a reporter for Radio Canada here to tell the truth about what's happening in Iraq. I was an Iranian journalist visiting the brave fighters of Sadr City.

Sometimes I went beyond the truth in the name of survival. I was a Sunni Arab with a speech impediment. I was a sympathetic journalist visiting the brave Sunni patriots of west Baghdad. I was among a group of pharmacists heading down to visit a hospital caring for truck bomb victims. Anything to get the story and get out.

In fact, I am an Iranian American reporter from Chicago, a graduate of [Columbia University](#)'s journalism school, where I was taught that the greatest journalists were impartial and balanced.

But in Iraq, I measured success through my ability to make it past checkpoints and gunfire, to melt into the background as mysterious masked gunmen flashed by, to ease back into the office compound alive, story in hand, and to breeze past any of the day's complications in chats with my editors.

At the end of every day, I put on my iPod and got on the treadmill to release the tension. I called Delphine, a journalist who early on had shared so many Iraq experiences with me, and assured her everything had gone well.

At the checkpoint on the road to Najaf, I struggled to decide whether to admit that I was an American journalist for a U.S. paper traveling in disguise. If I did, the gunmen could kill me and everyone with me, and no one might ever find out what became of us. I couldn't bear to think what Delphine would do if she didn't hear from me that night.

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MY time in Iraq had started so promisingly.

"Welcome!" said the peshmerga warrior. "Welcome to free Kurdistan!"

It was September 2002, months before the U.S.-led invasion. Delphine and I had just made it across the Iran-Iraq border into what was then the autonomous Kurdish enclave. We were freelance journalists then, in the springtime of our romance. We vowed to go on adventures together, in Iran, to the gulf, to Afghanistan. We had been struggling to get the necessary permits to cross the frontier into mountainous Kurdistan, and were thrilled to have finally made it in.

The peshmerga were irregular soldiers of an undeclared country. Even the border crossing from Iran was unofficial. We stayed at the Sulaymaniya Palace, an ostentatious hotel with terrible food and even worse service, but our first impressions of northern Iraq were great.

We were drawn to the Kurds' festive spirit, colorful weddings and boisterous candor. Their stated vision for a democratic federal Iraq was seductive in this authoritarian region of the world. They outlined their hopes in the snowy mountaintop town of Salahuddin.

"If the Kurds, the most unadvanced part of Iraq, can have democracy, why can't all Iraq have democracy?" said Jalal Talabani, then a Kurdish leader and now the president of Iraq.

But he also issued an ominous warning.

"Liberating Iraq is easy," he said. "Ruling Iraq is difficult. Ruling Iraq requires the full cooperation of the Iraqi people and the Iraqi opposition."

Even then we caught glimpses of the demons now ravaging Iraq. Kurdistan's democratic trappings masked corrupt, thuggish single-party fiefdoms run by former warlords. Their minions rolled through towns in pickup trucks with mounted machine guns.

Political parties had their private militias. Iranian-backed Shiite gunmen opposed to Saddam Hussein fought against Baghdad-backed militants opposed to Tehran. Muslim radicals bombed Kurdish nationalists in the dead of night. Western intelligence agencies camped out on mountaintops

spotting bombing sites in Kirkuk.

The tensions came to a head when Kurdish peshmerga opened fire in a gangland-style execution of five suspected Muslim radicals at a checkpoint. Kurdish security officials assured reporters that the killings were justified as part of their fight against terrorism. It soon emerged that the victims were members of a group allied with the Kurdish government, killed in a still-murky case of mistaken identity.

As the war to oust Hussein began in March 2003, many feared chemical weapon attacks, refugee crises and a drawn-out conflict. But of all the violence and political chicanery that unfolded in northern Iraq during those months before the war, the checkpoint killing most foretold the dirty war that was to come.

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WITHIN weeks of the checkpoint incident, Delphine and I joined convoys of peshmerga and U.S. Special Forces storming Khanaqin and Kirkuk, and basked in the adulation of the liberated Kurds. They showered us with candy, flowers and hugs. Hussein's rule was wiped away.

But the country's unraveling began quickly. By day, looters swarmed Iraqi military bases, hauling off rocket-propelled-grenade launchers and mortar rounds. At night, explosions boomed throughout the land and fires raged into the sky.

Outside the friendly, pro-American Kurdish areas, political troubles started early. We entered Hussein's hometown, Tikrit, a few hours before the Marines did. We were greeted with smiles at a gas station. But a friendly man warned us to get out quickly. Among the welcoming faces, he said, were Hussein loyalists who would harm us. We sped away, returning the next day to see Marines arresting middle-aged Sunni Arab men, putting them in plastic handcuffs and seating them on the pavement.

The detainees smiled at the troops.

In retrospect, anyone could have seen what was coming next, but much like the U.S. officials, we were oblivious. We listened to the complaints and warnings from ordinary Iraqis: no electricity, no security, unfair detentions. "Where is the freedom?" they said. "Where is the democracy? Soon we will

take up arms."

We also gave credence to the narrative described by American officials in the Green Zone, Iraq's U.S.-protected administrative headquarters in central Baghdad.

"We measure our success on whether Iraq is on a path toward a sovereign democratic future with a government whose policies are dedicated to being at peace with its own citizens, peace with its neighbors, peace with the international community and certainly peace with the United States," a spokesman for the U.S.-run Coalition Provisional Authority, Dan Senor, said in June 2004. "That is the path we are on."

We found ourselves charmed by Baghdad. Life was hard during the first year or two after the invasion: The generators roared all night and the heat was unbearable. The stench of raw sewage rose from the nearby Tigris River. But we were intrigued by the new Iraq.

It was a land where Sufi musicians in the city of Fallouja crafted songs about jihad and artists turned from painting portraits of Hussein to those of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. New television stations broadcast funny soap operas chronicling the lives of Iraqis.

We lunched with Iraqi friends at fancy restaurants named Latakia and the White Palace. We shopped for clothes and shoes in the upscale Mansour district. Karaoke night with other journalists at the Chinese restaurant was a treat.

I had drinks with my driver, Abbas, at his little plot of land. He nicknamed it Camp David. Once, Abbas, a Shiite, invited me over along with some Sunni Muslim pals from Fallouja. The talk turned to the aggressive tactics of anti-American cleric Muqtada Sadr's Shiite militia, the Jaish al-Mahdi, or Al Mahdi army.

There was a moment of tense silence.

"Here's to the Jaish al-Whiskey!" Abbas said suddenly, holding his drink aloft. We roared with laughter. Sunnis and Shiites, Iranians and Americans, all were welcome in the Jaish al-Whiskey.

Delphine and I priced houses to rent and thought gingerly about the prospect of moving to Iraq to cover the reconstruction. After all, L. Paul

Bremer III, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority until it was dissolved in June 2004, was talking about a Marshall Plan for Iraq.

In Samarra, I coaxed Delphine up the famous minaret. Afraid of heights, she cursed me as I nearly dragged her up.

"Trust me," I said. "You'll be happy when we get to the top."

"I hate you!" was her reply.

But once we got to the top, she was elated. We looked out upon a gorgeous scene: the palm tree groves, the azure waters of the Tigris, the gleaming golden-domed Askari shrine.

"It was worth it," she said.

I asked her to marry me a few months later. We seated the guests at tables named after cities where we'd worked: Tehran, Kabul, Dubai and so on. We sat at Baghdad.

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IRAQ'S descent quickly intruded onto our illusions. The violence edged closer and closer. We befriended Al Arabiya television correspondent Ali Khatib a few months before he was killed. We met with clerics in Najaf a few weeks before its shrine was bombed, killing Ayatollah Mohammed Bakr Hakim and launching the spiral of sectarian violence that would become the narrative of the coming years.

We lunched in the cafeteria of the United Nations headquarters on the Canal Highway a couple of days before it was bombed. We missed by seconds a massive roadside bombing that killed an American soldier on the highway to Fallouja. I was sleeping in my hotel room when a bomb went off close by, shattering the windows and lodging shrapnel in the wall of my kitchenette.

Honestly, I loved the action and adrenaline. The more dangerous, the greater the exhilaration. I got used to the gunfire and explosions. Sadly, I even got used to the smell of burnt flesh after car bombs exploded. I believed I could distance myself from it, as long as I was not physically

harmed.

I became attached to the Iraqis I worked with. The more danger and horrors we experienced together and survived together, the closer we became. I cherished relations with ordinary Iraqis, politicians, U.S. Embassy officials and soldiers I befriended.

I told friends and colleagues that Iraq was the most important story of our time. And though covering it was the most difficult and dangerous job I have ever had, it was also the most rewarding.

As the situation in Iraq grew more dire, Delphine left Iraq for the most part, for the relative safety of reporting in Tehran. I took a full-time job with The Times, committing myself to an even longer stay in Baghdad. My wife and I began spending more and more time apart. (I joked that my coalition partner was abandoning me, just like Spain and others ditched President Bush.) What had started out as a romantic adventure became a dangerous full-time job and a bizarre lifestyle.

I came up with more innovative survival tricks. My greatest fear was being followed by gunmen or kidnappers as we left an appointment or the hotel, which everyone in Baghdad knew was teeming with Western journalists and contractors.

Sometimes, I would dress down, like an Iraqi laborer, and walk off the hotel compound with Nadeem, my interpreter, holding digital cameras, recorders and notebooks in a decrepit plastic bag. Our driver would pull up, with a little "taxi" plate on the roof of his sedan. We'd pretend to haggle with him for a few seconds before getting into the car.

A little facial hair, a Middle Eastern complexion and local clothes helped me blend in, as long as I didn't open my mouth. But there were far more close calls than I care to remember.

Once after interviewing truck bomb witnesses in downtown Baghdad, we were briefly stopped by the police.

"Who are you? Where's your identification?"

We cleared up the confusion, only to stumble into greater peril.

"They're American journalists!" one Iraqi cop announced to his superior, amid the huge crowd. It felt like all eyes were on us as we briskly walked away.

I was scarred, tired and adrift in a sea of sandbags, razor wire, blast barriers and gunfire. Death became part of my daily rhythm.

Mornings I awoke to the dry thud of explosions across the city. The metallic clang of weapons loading signaled preparations for an afternoon trip to the grocery store. Night fell, and after days that stretched 19 hours, I fell asleep to the sounds of automatic gunfire.

I rarely mentioned the close calls to my wife.

"How was your day?" she asked on the phone.

"It ended up being fine," I replied.

My goal was to prevent Iraq's troubles from flooding into my life or those of the increasingly demoralized Iraqis I worked with. But inevitably, Iraq began inundating my waking hours, even when I wasn't in Iraq.

On a holiday in Sri Lanka, the ongoing battle between government troops -- dominated by the majority Sinhalese -- and Tamil separatists obscured the beach and sun.

"Where are you coming from?" the driver of the tiny three-wheeled tuk-tuk asked us.

"It's none of your business," I snapped at him. "Just drive."

"What are you doing?" Delphine chastised me. "He's just trying to be nice. And you're not in Iraq."

During a drive through Chicago, I imagined the majority Latino West Side fighting against the mostly African American South Side. I imagined fighters setting up mortar positions along the Dan Ryan Expressway. Snipers taking shots at rival gunmen from the top of Soldier Field, its facade crumbling from rocket fire.

In Tehran, a Dutch colleague spoke to me in English as we walked down

the street and I turned on him. "Shhhh!" I demanded. Be quiet.

"Dude!" he said. "We can speak English here! We're not in Iraq."

I was moody, despondent and distracted. I surfed the Web, checking for news updates from Baghdad. I saw a group of kids playing soccer, laughing in the streets of Tehran, and I just wanted to cry.

Delphine and I argued, always about the same thing: Even when I was not in Iraq, I was in Iraq.

"Why do you bother even coming home?" she said.

At a dinner party once, I accidentally told the story of one of my close calls. Delphine was outraged. "You didn't tell me about that," she reprimanded me.

"I didn't want you to worry," I said meekly.

Months later, I became enraged when I found out she hadn't told me about a frightening encounter she'd had with authorities in Tehran. We hadn't seen each other in two months, and here we were fighting. I was indignant. "I knew something was wrong. You lied to me."

She was having none of it. "Well, you do the same thing to me," she said.

We were becoming two loners, deceiving each other in pursuit of our addictions.

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I trembled each time the trucks rumbled past on the road to Najaf. I had seconds to make a decision. Left with little recourse, I decided to tell the man at the checkpoint the truth: I was an American journalist traveling in disguise. He asked for my American passport. I told him I didn't bring it. "Would you bring an American passport on this road?" I asked defensively.

His assistant nodded in understanding, but the older man looked at me and shook his head, his frown hardening.

With my fear came a strange calm, a sense of resignation.

Then the guy's frown melted and he smirked, shaking his head. He believed my story. I was no spy or terrorist. If anything, he thought I was a total moron for driving down this road, just a few months after the bombing of the Samarra shrine. The civil war was raging and every Iraqi who could flee the country was long gone. And here I was playing undercover agent.

He handed back my documents, but not before jotting down my personal details and obtaining the name and address of the hotel we'd be staying at in Najaf. I had survived yet another close call, and would hear Delphine's voice again that night.

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I am out of Iraq right now, but I keep having to remind myself that there's no countdown anymore before my next trip to Baghdad. Getting ready for the next stint "in country" was always so hard. I could rarely sleep the nights before I left.

It's getting better now. I am learning again to appreciate quiet breakfasts with my wife and boisterous games of soccer with friends. But readjusting to ordinary life is hard. I miss the action.

I still daydream about my last helicopter ride to go north of Baghdad. I stuffed in earplugs and strapped on a flak jacket.

I thrilled as the Black Hawk lifted up, swinging over the Green Zone across the homes of the brawny, good-humored British, South African and American security contractors. We skirted past the mosque of the wily Shiite cleric who venomously ripped into his enemies during Friday prayers, but politely offered visitors tea and sweets.

We passed over a marketplace, where teens in plastic slippers pushed around wooden gurneys while shopkeepers worked their prayer beads. Young women stood in the courtyard of a school, perhaps recounting the woes that befell loved ones. Farmers outside the city limits worked ancient fields of barley and wheat. Boys and girls dressed in colorful robes of pink and purple walking on a dirt road waved up to us.

I imagined reaching my hand out and grasping them, drawing them all into

my heart.

All of them.