



THEY SAY  
WE ARE  
INFIDELS

*On the run from ISIS with  
persecuted Christians  
in the Middle East*



MINDY  
BELZ  
— EDITOR OF —  
WORLD MAGAZINE

What happened to the Jews in Germany in the 1930s and to the Rwandans in the 1990s is happening to Christians in Iraq and Syria today while the United States does nothing. *Again*. And again U.S. journalists are ignoring it, the story of our generation. But thank God one journalist has not ignored it. In fact, Mindy Belz has lived through much of it, and in *They Say We Are Infidels* she has produced a searing, journalistic tour de force. It is a courageous, absolutely fascinating book that tells us how this has happened—and how it is happening now, this minute. *Tolle lege*.

ERIC METAXAS

*New York Times* bestselling author and nationally syndicated radio host

To be a Christian in Iraq and Syria is to live in mortal danger. Churches are bombed, pastors murdered, children kidnapped. Families whose ancestors have survived two thousand years in the region where Christ and his disciples walked now risk elimination by Islamic terrorists. Journalist Mindy Belz has spent more than a decade covering persecuted Christians in the Middle East. *They Say We Are Infidels* is her brilliantly reported account of what it means to be a follower of Jesus there. It is the harrowing and often inspiring story of men and women of unshakable faith.

MELANIE KIRKPATRICK

Author of *Escape from North Korea: The Untold Story of Asia's Underground Railroad*

This sensitive, informative, and beautifully written book possesses all the immediacy and emotional power of a novel. Yet it combines meticulous reporting of real people with an enormous knowledge of the contemporary Middle East. Belz reflects a deep concern for the courageous Christians suffering persecution there, and her writing is engaging and wrenchingly intimate. Insightful, lucid, and irenic, this book will do much to dispel the fog of misunderstanding that prevails among so many concerning the extent of suffering there. Her moving and gripping account could not be more urgent and timely. After finishing this book, readers will immediately want to pray for our brothers and sisters in this troubled region of the world. I know I did.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE

Vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington, DC

Mindy Belz has earned respect for reporting on world affairs with accuracy and insight for over twenty-five years. In *They Say We Are Infidels*, Belz chronicles the rise of Islamic extremism and the worsening plight of Christians in the Middle East since 2003 through the eyes of the Iraqi people. The narrative is informative, powerful, and beautifully written. This book is a must-read for all who are concerned about what is happening in the Middle East.

**FRANK R. WOLF**

Member of Congress, retired (1981–2014); senior distinguished fellow,  
The 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative; Wilson Chair in Religious Freedom,  
Baylor University

Mindy Belz's book should be nominated for Book of the Year! The world cannot continue ignoring the genocide and persecution in the Middle East. Read this, then buy copies for all your friends.

**DR. RICK WARREN**

Author of *The Purpose Driven Life*





THEY SAY  
WE ARE  
INFIDELS

*On the run from ISIS with  
persecuted Christians  
in the Middle East*

MINDY BELZ



**TYNDALE®  
MOMENTUM**

*An Imprint of  
Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.*

Visit Tyndale online at [www.tyndale.com](http://www.tyndale.com).

Visit Tyndale Momentum online at [www.tyndalemomentum.com](http://www.tyndalemomentum.com).

*Tyndale Momentum* and the Tyndale Momentum logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Tyndale Momentum is an imprint of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

*They Say We Are Infidels: On the Run from ISIS with Persecuted Christians in the Middle East*

Copyright © 2016 by Mindy Belz. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph copyright © EPA/Darek Delmanowicz Poland Out. All rights reserved.

Author photograph taken by Naomi Schindler, copyright © 2015. All rights reserved.

Interior map copyright © Tyndale House Publishers. All rights reserved.

Interior photographs are the property of their respective copyright holders and all rights are reserved. Displaced girls copyright © Wathiq Khuzaie/Stringer/Getty Images; ISIS fighters copyright © AP Photo; ISIS leader copyright © AP Photo/Militant video; home in Mosul copyright © Stringer/AFP/Getty Images; Kurdish Yazidis copyright © Joseph Rose/BGR/Genesis Photos; displaced Iraqi Christians copyright © Joseph Rose/IMB/Genesis Photos; Sunni Muslims fleeing copyright © Anadolu Agency/Contributor-Ali Mohammed/Getty Images; destroyed church courtesy of CAPNI. All other interior photographs are from the personal collection of Mindy Belz and are used with permission.

Designed by Dean H. Renninger

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® NIV.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Belz, Mindy, author.

Title: They say we are infidels : on the run from ISIS with persecuted Christians in the Middle East / Mindy Belz.

Description: Carol Stream, IL : Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015049191 | ISBN 9781496411471 (hc)

Subjects: LCSH: Persecution—Middle East. | Christians—Middle East. | IS (Organization) | Islamic fundamentalism.

Classification: LCC BR1601.3 .B45 2016 | DDC 956.9104/2—dc23 LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015049191>

ISBN 978-1-4964-1388-8 (International Trade Paper Edition)

Printed in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Mom*

-----

*Man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz;  
however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers  
upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips.*

VIKTOR FRANKL



# Contents

*Map of Iraq and Syria* xi

*Preface: Pay Money* xiii

## **PART 1: War and Peace**

1. Insaf's Journey 3
2. Right of Return 11
3. No Guarantees 19
4. Fire like Cold Water 35
5. The War Before 51
6. Window of Opportunity 63

## **PART 2: Chasing Peace**

7. Vanished 81
8. Crusaders and the Mujahideen 91
9. Places of Exile 105
10. The Keeper of Nahum's Tomb 127
11. A Church of Martyrs 139
12. Fasting and Flight 157

## **PART 3: Inside the House of War**

13. The Coming of a New Caliphate 171
14. The Death of One American 185
15. The New Jihad 197
16. Emptying Mosul 213
17. Enlisted 229
18. The Final Fall 239

- 19. Fighting ISIS 255
- 20. Cities of Refuge 269
- 21. A Garden by Night 285

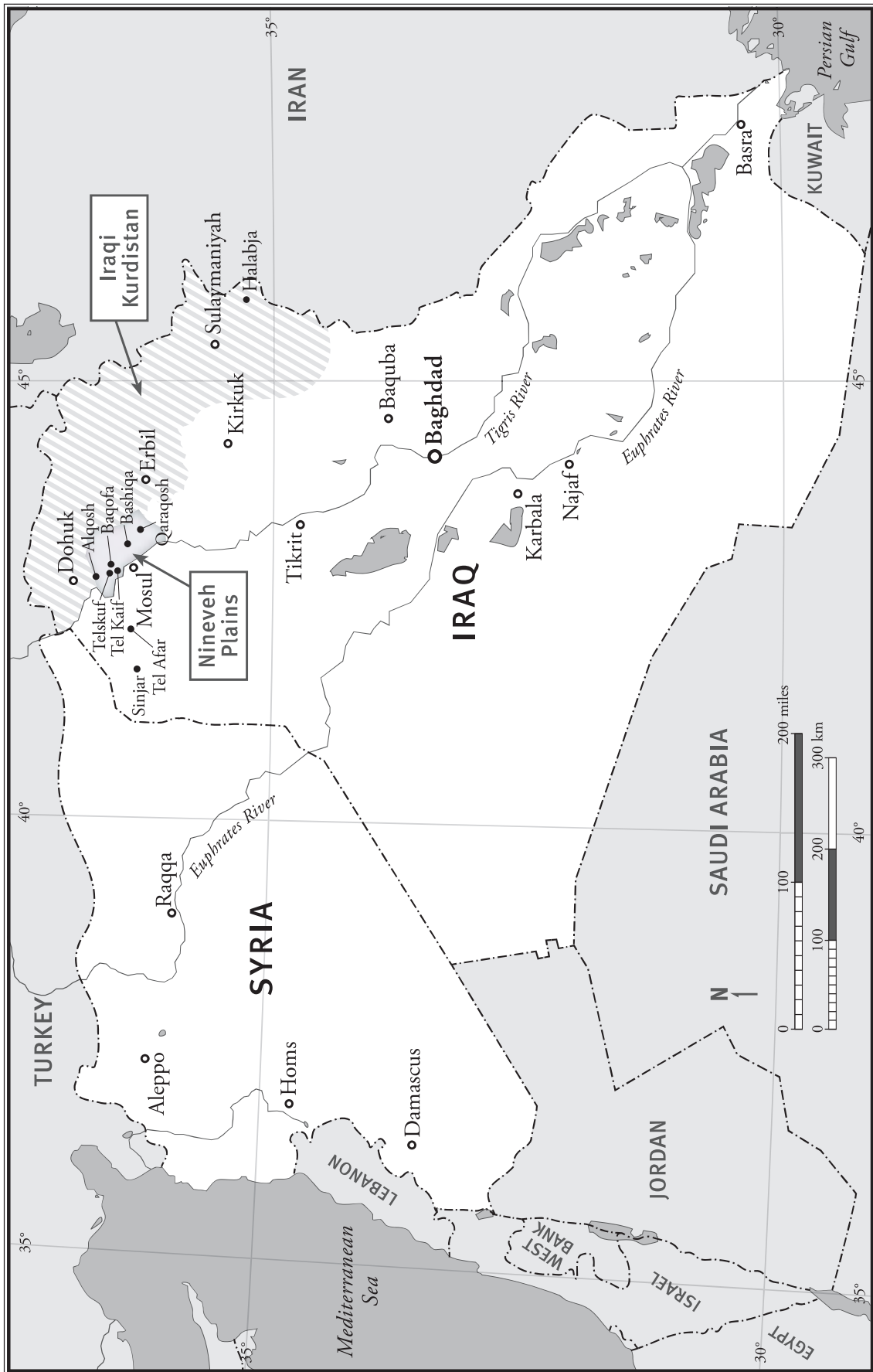
*Acknowledgments* 299

*Time Line of Key Events in Iraq and Syria* 303

*Notes* 309

*Index* 317

*About the Author* 321





# Preface

## PAY MONEY

Odisho Yousif choked on baked dust and felt gravel tear into his cheek. His chest throbbed where the man his captors called “Commander” had kicked him. Odisho’s breath came in sharp heaves as he looked up at the Commander towering over him, holding his identity card.

Like all Iraqi IDs, Odisho’s had a line indicating his religion, and his was marked *Christian*. The Commander, who never removed his black face mask, paced to and fro in the gray dawn, turning the tattered card over and over. “You are an agent with the Jews of Israel!” he exploded.

“No, no!” Odisho protested. “I am a Christian from Iraq.”

Odisho was pummeled once more by the Commander’s boot, and by a sense of the helplessness of his predicament.

The irony didn’t escape him. His job, after all, was to carry money—the funds raised by church members to pay ransom for Christians kidnapped by Islamic militants. As often as he had helped other victims, Odisho never dreamed he might become one himself.

The year was 2006—eight years before the Islamic fighters known as ISIS launched strikes into the center of Iraq’s Christian heartland. Everywhere militants were blowing up Christians—their churches, grocery stores, and homes. They threatened them with kidnapping. They vowed to take their children. The message to these “infidels”: *You don’t belong in Iraq. Leave, pay the penalty to stay, or be ready to die.*



Much of the world didn't grasp the deadly dangers for Iraq's Christians until 2014, when a group calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, took Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, in a lightning-fast overnight strike. From that moment genocide unfolded—with rapes, shootings, and beheadings—as ISIS fighters forced thousands of Christians and other non-Muslims to flee.

Long before, Odisho was among thousands who could testify to a decade of such brutality. The ultimatum ISIS handed Mosul's Christians in 2014—pay *jizya*, convert to Islam, or be killed—was too familiar to believers like him.

Paying ransom came as part of the commerce of war. Christians knew that it financed more bombings and more terror, yet they had no choice but to pay. Given Odisho's connections and his ability to raise money and direct it to families who needed it, he naturally became the conduit of funds for kidnapping victims and bombing survivors.

“Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, . . . [even if they are] of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued,” reads the Quran,<sup>1</sup> and the ancient church leaders historically paid the *jizya* mandated by Islamic law. Modern infidels were paying it just the same: paying special taxes to hold public events and to serve Communion wine. In other words, it was the price to live among Muslims in the Christians' own homeland. In times of war, it was the price to survive.

The decimation of Christians and their communities in the Middle East looks at first like a problem “over there.” While sad, it appears too complicated, too tied up in the complex politics of the region, and too big to solve. For me a tragedy held at arm's length over time has become personal. As a reporter covering international events, I've made multiple trips to the region over the past twenty years. While I'm supposed to remain an objective observer, many of these “infidels”—ordinary people committed to raising families and finding work, often after being forced from their homes and losing

everything they own—are not merely sources or subjects. They have become friends.

+ + +

For fifty-year-old Odisho, the second of July had begun like so many others. Temperatures rocketed past 110 degrees as he left Dohuk, the city in the far north where he lived, in the company of his driver, a distant relative. By morning he had collected four thousand dollars from churches in Mosul and the surrounding villages of Nineveh Plains; by afternoon, he was making his way along a stretch of good highway south to Baghdad.

Halfway along the five-hour route, the car broke down. As his driver went for help, Odisho, a wiry man with dark hair and tinted glasses, paced and smoked, kicking up dust with the toe of his black leather shoe.

Minutes later a black Opal drove up. Four men wearing black masks stepped out. Before Odisho had time to react, they pulled handguns from their belts and surrounded him. They shouted and wagged their weapons to hustle him into the backseat of their car, but Odisho resisted, backing away. One of the gunmen shot him in the leg. He tumbled into the car, his leg grazed by the bullet, bleeding. After rounding up Odisho's driver, the abductors forced both men, facedown and crouched, into the back of the car. A gunman perched between them.

The car sped off into the desert. Odisho couldn't see, but he guessed they were heading toward Baquba, a town forty miles north of Baghdad that seethed with violence. A month earlier outside Baquba, U.S. forces had killed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the head of al-Qaeda in Iraq. The area remained a hotbed for terrorism.

"We have been watching you ever since you left Kirkuk," one of the kidnapers said. But Odisho hadn't traveled through that city. Perhaps his captors were gang members or simple thugs, Odisho thought, rather than trained al-Qaeda militants. He guessed they might be looking for money or prestige by turning hostages over to al-Qaeda.

Shoved onto the floorboard next to a gunman, Odisho felt shock

and fear settle over him. *I am a prize hostage*, he realized. *A prominent member of the Assyrian Patriotic Party with visible access to money*. As he considered the impossible burden his kidnapping would impose on others, a heavy dread that turned his stomach spread through him. His body shook all over at the thought of the gunshot to his leg. He couldn't see anything; he could only listen to the whine of wheels just beneath his head and feel the cool metal of the gun pressed to his temple.

The sound of asphalt turned to that of dirt and gravel. Around nightfall the car made a final turn and came to a stop. After being pulled from the car, Odisho stood and looked around. Dirt roadways etched a path lined with fuel tanks, old equipment, and some dilapidated army vehicles. *A deserted military depot*, Odisho thought as his kidnapers began to rearrange corrugated metal sheets and scrap into a shelter. In the distance Odisho saw the Hamrin Mountains in the east. As he had guessed, they were near Baquba.

Odisho lay on the bare ground but couldn't sleep. As the air turned brisk, the sweat of the day cooled against his skin. He shivered uncontrollably. He stood up, paced, sat for a while, then got up and paced some more. When he thought of his two sons at home with his wife, he had to fight not to cry. His driver dozed, and the gunmen kept a lookout. Just before dawn the Commander arrived and began questioning Odisho.

After making accusations, the Commander stormed away with Odisho's belongings, leaving him in the dust. Odisho collected himself but didn't try to stand, and he waited. Hours passed as the Commander talked on a cell phone and argued in Arabic with the gunmen about what to do with the pair. Meanwhile, Odisho and the driver spoke to each other in low tones in Syriac. This ancient language, a dialect of the Aramaic spoken by Jesus Christ, was still spoken by Iraq's Assyrian Christians.

By daylight the Commander told Odisho his ransom had been set at \$300,000. It was impossibly higher than the usual demands. Odisho shook his head.

"Kill me," he told the Commander. "It is better."

Even as Odisho waited at the abandoned military depot, the seeds of ISIS were forming as a breakaway group from al-Qaeda. In 2006 the Islamic State of Iraq vowed to plant “the flag of the state of Islam” in Iraq, while the West remained transfixed by elections and a budding democracy there.

That same year, an Assyrian clergyman in Iraq gave me an itemized list of Christians who had been killed and kidnapped since the 2003 invasion. It ran to twenty-four pages. It cataloged car bombs at universities and targeted killings at cosmetics shops or outside homes. Christians were killed for joining Christian-affiliated political parties, for being related to clergymen, for owning factories or businesses and refusing to pay *jizya*—in effect, bribes—to Islamic militants. Many of those who were kidnapped turned up dead.

About six thousand Iraqi Christians had by then fled Baghdad and other major cities for safety in the north. The threats and bloodshed should have been a warning of the terror to come—but few paid attention to what was happening to the Christians three years into the war.

When they did see danger signs, Western leaders were reluctant to get involved. The U.S. leaders in particular, starting with George W. Bush’s administration and continuing through the Obama presidency, traded an American legacy of standing up for minorities who faced annihilation—Holocaust survivors, Russian Pentecostals, Rwandans, Congolese, and many others—for a political advantage that never manifested itself. American leaders exchanged the lives of those targeted by sectarian militants for the supposed advantage of appearing nonsectarian.

The reluctance of Western leaders to intervene seemed to stem in part from a tragic misunderstanding. Few diplomats and military commanders appreciated the unique history of Christianity in Iraq; they assumed it was an import of British colonial rule or an invention of American evangelicals.

Nineveh Province was, in fact, the seat of the Church of the East, a church begun at the time of Pentecost when “residents of Mesopotamia”

received the Holy Spirit, according to the Book of Acts.<sup>2</sup> The apostle Thomas and others planted the seeds of Christian faith in Iraq, and the church that grew was astute and ardent enough to send two delegates to the Council of Nicea in 325.

That history was forgotten as the terror directed at Christians in Nineveh and the province's capital, Mosul, began. Soon after the United States toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, a missile struck a convent in Mosul. Christian schools came under attack, as well as Christian-owned businesses—especially beauty salons, stores selling liquor or music, and clothing shops. In August 2004, militants bombed five churches in Mosul and Baghdad. The coordinated attacks happened on a Sunday evening as all the churches held worship services, killing twelve people and injuring about sixty.

As thousands of Iraqi Christians fled the country after the church bombings, one deacon complained that his congregation had to spend more time filling out baptismal forms needed to emigrate than they did in worship: "Our community is being decimated."<sup>3</sup>

Lacking protection and support, about two-thirds of the Christians living in Iraq in 2003 had disappeared by 2011. With the start of Syria's civil war that year, the pattern of targeting Christians expanded. Islamic militants moved across the border from Iraq to join the fight against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Early on they killed more than two hundred Christians living in the old city of Homs, including entire families with their children. They kidnapped churchgoers there, too, demanding a ransom similar to Odisho Yousif's.

The militias made no secret of their intention to establish a Sunni caliphate stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Iranian border, and perhaps beyond. Unstopped, they eventually would bleed back into Iraq to finish their work.

Yet as threats against non-Muslims were increasing in 2011, the United States military went home. Church leaders in Iraq told me that by 2014 the number of Christians had shrunk to perhaps 250,000 believers, a fraction of what it had been before the United States "liberated"

Iraq. That July, President Barack Obama appointed an envoy to the Arctic region while ignoring pleas to name an envoy to monitor and protect religious minorities in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup>

The prospect of Christian extinction in Iraq spurred Islamic jihadists to act globally, pursuing their goals in Nigeria, Mali, and far-flung places like Indonesia. As one leading journalist wrote, “The most under-covered story these days is the sustained assault by Islamic terrorists on Christians.”<sup>5</sup>

As a reporter, I began covering international events for *World* magazine at the end of the Cold War, and throughout the 1990s I saw Islamic extremism rising in communism’s place to menace the West. In Sudan I passed just south of Osama bin Laden’s training camp and saw the ravages of Islamic terrorism directed at southern Sudan’s Christian community.

For many reporters like me, 9/11 changed everything. I found myself covering the Middle East nonstop, discovering that lurking beneath bin Laden’s “war on America” was an ongoing assault on Christians wherever they were found. During a trip to Damascus in 2002, I discovered that Sudan was trafficking Sudanese Christians to Syria, where they would be tortured and ordered to convert. In Egypt, the country with the largest population of Christians in the Middle East, believers came under increasing pressure to leave their faith or leave the country.

I didn’t go looking for Christians in Iraq; I stumbled upon them when I went to cover a U.S.-led war. But the vitality of the Christian community there would draw me in, and their underreported plight would compel me to return again and again.



PART 1

---

WAR AND  
PEACE



1

# INSAF'S JOURNEY

*Amman, 2003*

-----

*Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my sojourning.*

PSALM 119:54

-----

Insaf Safou had ten thousand American dollars to give away. They were measured in tens, twenties, and fifties and distributed among dozens of white envelopes. Each bore the name, penciled in soft lead, of a family in Iraq. Some were written in Arabic, some in English. None of them meant anything to me.

“You will take how many thousand through customs for me?” Insaf asked.

We had known each other for maybe one minute and were riding in the backseat of a two-door sedan belonging to a mutual friend, wedged together with luggage tumbling over our shoulders and jammed at our feet. After my overnight stay in Amman, our mutual friend, an American living in Jordan with her family, had collected us one after the other from different street corners. Arab drivers flew past, honking their horns. We were on our way to Amman's Queen Alia International Airport on the outskirts of the city, then on to Baghdad in Insaf's homeland.

Insaf's question hung in the air, close. She stared at me, unblinking. I wasn't sure I'd met an Iraqi Arab Christian before, certainly not one so bold. Her round face and pronounced cheekbones were welcoming. But her dark eyes flashed, demanding.

The white envelopes fanned before me like a royal flush, and I wondered what I'd gotten myself into. I stuttered in reply, then looked back to Insaf's face, a moment ago taut with the power of a just cause, now giving way like glass across a floor. She laughed.

"I am only thinking business before pleasure, and forgetting we must first become friends."

It was December 2003. Nine years earlier, Insaf, her husband, and their two small children had left Iraq. Like many Iraqis who faced threats under Saddam Hussein, they made their way to Jordan, then to Turkey. After seven years as refugees in Istanbul, they immigrated to Canada.

When I first met Insaf, Iraq had been liberated from the grip of Saddam Hussein, and she was on her way back to Baghdad for the first time since her departure. From a compact red carry-on case at her feet, she retrieved a thin notebook with a flowery cover and handed it to me. Inside, written in a careful hand, were the names of families in Iraq who were to receive a portion of the money she carried, and the amount. She had arranged the list with space for each recipient to sign his or her name, so that when she returned to Canada she could show the donors that their money had been signed for and delivered.

The families in Canada who donated the money were Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic Christians—Iraqi exiles whose roots extended from the mountains of the upper Euphrates Valley to the plains of Nineveh and down to the southern desert.

Before I met Insaf in Amman, we had talked once by phone—a kind of interview to see whether she would permit me, a reporter, to accompany her on this homecoming. I learned then that Insaf had been born into a Catholic family in Kirkuk. As a young woman, she started attending the Kirkuk Evangelical Church, an Iraqi-led congregation

established by Scottish Presbyterian missionaries in 1941. She considered herself a born-again, evangelical Christian.

Now I leafed through her flowered notebook, impressed. We were perhaps ten minutes into our relationship, nearing Queen Alia airport, when I agreed to take several packets of money across the border. I folded the envelopes and buttoned them into a leg pocket of my cargo pants, wondering whether I might have been too quick to trust the enterprise of this petite yet sturdy Iraqi.

Insaf was a woman both weighed down by the world and freed from it. The weight showed in the slump of her shoulders and in her pale, creased face. She was forty-five years old, and two years in the West hadn't erased the physical toll of a lifetime living under the regime of Saddam Hussein. Her country was at war, Saddam and his loyalists were hiding somewhere, and Insaf knew only a little of what lay ahead for her when she reached Baghdad. Would she find her extended family, her friends, her old neighborhoods? Yet when she spoke, she was full of confidence and her eyes glistened. They darted over me during our conversation with the passion of a free spirit, of a girl.

Insaf was a refugee who had made countless homes in four different countries with her husband and two children. Her cloistered upbringing included Catholic schools in tenth-century abbeys. She knew privilege and poverty; she knew what it was like to wake up with a missile embedded in her kitchen wall; and she knew four languages as a result of her sojourning.

I'd spent my life wholly in the United States, living on the Eastern Seaboard in two different states not far from where my forebears had arrived in America in the 1600s. I'd had a charmed childhood where church came in brick buildings with white steeples and the Middle East appeared only in the burlap and hay used to make a Nativity scene each year for the baby Jesus. Together, Insaf and I had to bridge chasms that were wider than the ocean we'd crossed to get to the Middle East.

I had seen war before, in Bosnia and in Sudan, and had made one trip to Iraq before this war, but I knew little about what to expect.

Working for a small independent publication like *World* magazine, I had no bureau awaiting me in Baghdad, no hired translator or body-guard. As most journalists would do, I would spend a few days as an embed at a U.S. military base north of Baghdad, seeing how the war was going from the perspective of American servicemen and women. At a combat hospital, I would witness the hard labor of Americans working around the clock. I would watch the helicopters ferry in the wounded, including an eighteen-year-old Marine with his face blown off by an improvised explosive device (IED). I would see how the doctors and nurses rose from their cots and headed to the operating room at any hour to bind up the wounds of war.

Insaf had her own combat mission, and I made the journey with her to witness an exile's homecoming and a family reunion as once-displaced Iraqis were returning in the months after Saddam was toppled. I came to see through her eyes how the U.S. invasion transformed her ancient homeland and to witness life outside the protection of soldiers, where Iraqis encountered the war every day. But by crossing the border with money in my pocket, I had become, in a sense, her accomplice. We would embark together, find out how much her country had changed, and discover the high cost of going back.

+ + +

Once at the airport, Insaf and I climbed aboard the small Beechcraft plane that would fly us to Baghdad. Captain Chris Erasmus and copilot Rudolph Van Eeden sipped thick coffee out of squat paper cups as they waited for permission to take off. December mornings in Amman break overcast in a cool, dull haze. Erasmus was less concerned about the weather and more about military clearance. His twin-engine turboprop was a workhorse in war zones. But flying into Iraq's capital city, nearly nine months into the U.S.-led invasion, had just gotten hairy.

Erasmus and Van Eeden had started piloting humanitarian flights over Baghdad in November. Their carrier, Air Serv International, had been founded in the 1980s for just this type of mission. Each flight

before takeoff, they waited to get a slot from air-traffic controllers a thousand miles away, operating out of the U.S. air base in Doha, Qatar. Receiving a slot meant they could enter Iraqi airspace knowing that they had some U.S. military cover.

A week earlier, slots had grown scarce after militants fired a shoulder-to-air missile that had hit a DHL cargo plane during takeoff, forcing it to make an emergency landing with one wing on fire.

After that, aircraft dodged attacks every day from the ground near the newly reopened Baghdad International Airport. Commercial airlines grounded passenger flights in and out of Baghdad. U.S. Central Command clamped down on available slots, reserving the Iraqi airspace for military flights. Humanitarian flights by Air Serv International were the only option left for civilians. As we blew on our coffee and waited, the pilots explained to me that permission to fly into Iraqi airspace, when it came from Doha, now came with a disclaimer: Fly at your own risk.

“In other words, you might get shot down,” said Erasmus.

“And don’t come crying to the U.S. military if that happens,” added Van Eeden.

In May, Air Serv took three hundred passengers a month into Iraq. By November, its manifests were running a thousand a month, so it added another Beech1900D, a nineteen-seater, and brought on Erasmus and Van Eeden. Demand for seats stayed high as travel by car went from dangerous to out of the question. The road from Amman to Baghdad was a shooting gallery, especially if a Westerner was caught traveling on it.

None of it worried Erasmus or Van Eeden, who had flown in other wars, most recently the one in Afghanistan.

“Ever been shot at?” I asked.

“We don’t know because we’ve never been hit,” Erasmus replied.

+ + +

Many Americans expected the U.S. forces to come home after they watched on-screen as Marines pulled down the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad’s Firdos Square. The Coalition Provisional Authority settled

in under Paul Bremer, embracing the call of President George W. Bush to oversee a “global democratic revolution” in the Middle East led by the United States: a mission with a breathless urgency similar to the Berlin Airlift that began in 1948 or the defense of Greece in 1947.

Eight months later, as I headed to Iraq in December 2003, the country was in disarray. Saddam and his sons were on the run, along with most of the disenfranchised officials from his Baath socialist party, but no successor government had been properly stood up. The streets of Baghdad overflowed with sewage. Roads remained blocked, cratered from U.S. bombings during the invasion. Electricity flickered. In some areas, running water ceased.

Americans didn’t appreciate how war-weary Iraqis were from the start. Bremer and others entered Baghdad energized, confident they could put abstract ideas about democracy and freedom to work and full of zeal about their own skills in political engineering. Iraqi statesmen who had been exiled during the Saddam Hussein years, having spent the previous decades in London or Washington, had similar thoughts. Iraqis who had stayed in their homeland had struggled to survive two wars in the past decade, not to mention the daily crush of life under a dictator. They were ready for change, but Saddam had conditioned them to expect order, not the chaos that ensued.

While the Americans tried to figure out Iraq, the jihadists came with a plan. From Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, Syria, and elsewhere, they came to fight the occupation. Some militant groups offered three thousand dollars for every U.S. soldier killed. Coalition casualties numbered between thirty and fifty a month, then suddenly spiked to 110 in November. The word on the street was that Saddam himself was directing the resistance, sometimes disguised as a taxi driver, a woman, or a nomad.

+ + +

From the air, the midday December sun cast long shards of light. We made our way from the chalk-white hills of Amman to the flat, burnt desert city of Baghdad. The flight took us east across a six-hundred-mile

stretch of desert. Insaf settled in to talk with two aid workers from Germany, both of whom were heading to Iraq to teach the logistics of holding elections. My seatmate was a consular-affairs officer from the U.S. State Department, just transferred from Cairo to the newly reopened embassy in Baghdad.

What was the hardest thing about serving in Iraq? I asked him.

“Working the overnight desk,” he replied, “and the late-night phone calls from American women who married Arab men and want out.”

He invited me to visit his office, located inside the military-protected Green Zone, after I settled in.

The plane cabin was spartan, with bottled water in a cooler as the only refreshment. But conversation was lively, full of the kind of diverse interests and perspectives that everyone hoped to see take root in the “new Iraq.” The nineteen passengers included the aid workers from Germany, an Egyptian pastor, an American teacher who lived in Jordan, relief workers from Sweden, and a couple of U.S. diplomats wearing suits.

Below us lay the border between Jordan and Iraq, a literal line in the sand. Border checkpoints were visible from the air, the sunlight glinting off razor-sharp concertina wire marking a fence line that stretched in both directions. We neared the Euphrates and saw the wide lines of irrigation canals first built by the Babylonians. Dirt tracks in the barren desert gradually became paved roads, then highways. Date groves dotted the sandscape, walled compounds surrounded flat-roofed houses, and finally the city came into view. At ten thousand feet, Erasmus leaned the controls left for the corkscrew landing we'd been briefed about in Amman.

High over Baghdad International, Erasmus steered the plane into concentric circles down to a quick, stomach-churning dive onto the runway to avoid heat-seeking missiles. As the plane spiraled, it took us over the presidential palaces. Each sprawled like a vast oasis in the desert. Al Faw, nearest the airport and surrounded by aquamarine water, was built by Saddam Hussein after the Iran-Iraq war and had sixty-two rooms plus twenty-nine bathrooms. Then As-Salam came into

view, a six-story palace already taken over by the U.S. military and visibly damaged from the U.S. “shock and awe” bombing runs. From As-Salam ran underground tunnels to other palaces, to government offices in central Baghdad, and to the airport. We made another circle, and there below was the Republican Palace, where the United States and its Coalition Provisional Authority had their headquarters. This vast complex reached into the city itself. Saddam had reportedly built eighty-one palaces while he ruled Iraq, and U.S. military commands had taken over nearly all of them. Inside, they created barracks and chipboard office cubicles, running cables for Internet and phone service across patterned marble floors.

From my bird’s-eye view, the palaces formed outsized symbols of the excesses of the now-deposed regime. They made for odd bunkers to garrison U.S. forces. Iraqis thought the Americans might be repeating history. As one journalist pointed out, “If you’re trying to convince a population that you have liberated them from a terrible dictator, why would you then sit in his throne?”<sup>1</sup>

Iraq was a different place since my first trip. Eighteen months earlier, I had crossed the Tigris River in an outboard motorboat with help from the Syrian security directorate and Iraqi Kurds. That way I avoided Saddam’s media minders, but I couldn’t stray outside the northern region of Iraqi Kurdistan, where a U.S.-led no-fly zone made it possible to maneuver without the regime’s oppressive scrutiny.

Unlike those furtive comings and goings, this time Insaf and I would enter Iraq legitimately and with stamped passports. She was chatting it up with other aid workers on the plane while secreting her cash and steeling her nerves for this, her first trip back. With her coming and her thousands of dollars, Insaf sought a resolution, not only from decades under Saddam but from centuries under Islamic rule.