

When I first set foot at Baghdad International Airport in March 2010 to work for The New York Times, I was no stranger to Iraq. Until 2003, Baghdad had been my home. I still had family and friends here, and they remained dear to me, and I to them.

Here, I had experienced wars, so many I almost lost count. Here was where I weathered it all, the good with the fear, yet never lost hope. I wish I still felt that way today.

On my first few days back in 2010, I found it hard to believe that all these foreign media bureaus were operating in the heart of Baghdad, without being scrutinized by government minders.

By the 1980s in the Iraq of Saddam Hussein, foreign businesses, schools and organizations had almost disappeared from the local scenery, apart from a small diplomatic corps. Anyone who had contact with a foreign person was required to report to Iraqi intelligence. I worked as a press officer for a European embassy. But unlike many of my peers, the intelligence agency's attempts to recruit me failed: I refused to cooperate.

As the drums of war were getting loud in the fall of 2002, the notorious intelligence agency did not put up with me anymore. They notified the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the ministry sent a letter to the embassy where I worked, requiring that my employment be terminated (although it was the embassy that had hired and paid me.) I remember that the attaché at the time said, "If it was in another place, I would sue." I did not understand what he meant. I recall thinking, "Sue whom?"

Still, I later realized that things could have been worse, that I could have "gone missing without a trace," rather than just losing my job.

This was not my first encounter with the Iraqi intelligence agency. In 1994, I opened a school for English. A couple of years later, after wrapping up an evening class, two men in beige suits sneaked into my office. My heart skipped a beat as soon as I saw them. "Mrs. Yasmine," one of them said. I answered with a shaky "Yes?" They did not waste time. "We heard that you are teaching youngsters the language of the 30-state aggression led by the U.S." Then I understood. The wounds of the 1991 Persian Gulf war were still fresh. "Our children were deprived of the things they asked for, from lollipops to ice cream to satchels." All because of the "mean" embargo imposed on our country.

The brief meeting drained more energy than my long day's work. I asked them to give me a couple of weeks to close down. It was a troubling day followed by many troubled nights when their pudgy faces revisited me in my sleep.

During my first days back in 2010, the scary, heavily mustachioed, tan-suited figures I was once accustomed to were nowhere to be seen. I wondered, why do I feel more terrorized now than I was back then?

My marital home for almost 20 years was not far from The Times's Baghdad bureau. I know the area like the palm of my hand. Until February 2003, an old friend and I used to briskly walk its alleys. Yet I was too scared to step outside the bureau's premises. Today, the stakes are even higher. Violence comes without letters or visits or any warning at all, but in the form of explosions, kidnapping and targeted killings.

Ten years later, Iraq remains hostage to an ill-fated decision.

If there is no room left in this land for despair, is there any room for repair? Can we reclaim what is probably already lost? Or was the latest intervention by the United States the straw that broke the camel's back? I do not know. But I know this: for so many years I had dreamed of an Iraq free of Mr. Hussein. Now he is gone, yet I cannot enjoy it.