

Allies Ep. 2: A National of Iraq V3

04-19-22

MJ/BK

A warning for listeners. This podcast features stories about war, terrorism and violence. It's important to hear... but it can also be disturbing.

Shaker Jeffrey is an Iraqi Yazidi. Yazidis are an ethno-religious group.

[Shaker: “We have our own way to believe in God, our own traditions, our own language, our own civilizations.

And then we have been subjected to genocide in each country that we fled into.”]

In Iraq under Saddam Hussein’s regime... they couldn’t openly practice their religion or speak the Yazidi dialect... called Kurmanji.

[Shaker: “Under Saddam, we were not considered even the second place citizens of Iraq ... under his regime, we were afraid of saying that we are Yazidis.”]

Shaker grew up in a small village where Yazidis were forced to live. He says one of his favorite things to do as a kid was practice his English. Shaker started taking classes in fifth grade.

[Shaker: “We used to be after each class, just going outside in a field ... and trying to speak with each other, – like dialogues – ‘How are you, how are you doing? My name is Shaker.’ And we started to practice that and do that for several months ... So I felt like it’s something that belongs to me.”]

Shaker was in middle school when the U-S military invaded Iraq in 2003. He saw Americans for the first time the following year... when helicopters started landing near his village. Shaker remembers kids swarming around the American soldiers who gave them candy and bottles of Coca Cola.

[Shaker: “We went there just trying to talk to them and just spending time with them. I felt at that time, I felt like I was like the best kid *laughs”]

[MUSIC]

Shaker idolized these Americans. They told the Yazidis they'd bring freedom and prosperity to Iraq. Shaker believed them.

By the time he was 17... his English was strong. Shaker would watch American movies with his sister. He could close his eyes and translate them nearly word for word... he was even speaking to himself in English sometimes.

So Shaker started thinking about the future... and what he could do with this skill.

[Shaker: "Our financial situation with my family was pretty bad, we were not able to get even food."]

Shaker heard there was a company in Mosul that was hiring Iraqi *translators*. But he knew his family wouldn't let him go. They heard stories of translators who went to the front lines and got killed.

Shaker's mother even tried hiding his Iraqi ID to keep him from traveling. But he still wanted to go. So... he hatched a plan to get his family out of the house.

[ALLIES SYNTH]

It might sound a little strange, but Shaker got a bottle of Jack Daniels... gave it to his brother... and told him to drink.

[Shaker: "I brought some whiskey, I give it to my brother, I said 'hey, you drink. You drink, try to act like you're sick. The will be busy with you, take you to the doctor'"]

With the rest of his family distracted... Shaker left the house. A driver took him to Mosul.. There... he met with the Americans... filled out some paperwork... and got hired as a translator.

Shaker was headed to the front lines.

[Shaker: "I knew that how much danger would I not just bring to myself, but the rest of my family and my friends.

And it was like tough. To be honest, even if I try to describe it, it will not give you the perfect picture, but it was worse than whatever I would tell you.”]

[ALLIES THEME]

From Lawfare and Goat Rodeo... This is Allies... a podcast about America's eyes and ears.

I'm your host Bryce Klehm.

In this episode we'll take a detour to Iraq. To tell you how the Special Immigrant Visa program for *Iraqi* interpreters was created. Then replicated for Afghan interpreters. You'll hear from Shaker, American soldiers, diplomats and lawmakers who saw the threat that interpreters faced. And they'll describe the creative ways they tried to help before Congress stepped in.

This is Episode 2: 'A National of Iraq'

[THEME FADES]

In 2002... Secretary of State Colin Powell reached out to a diplomat named Ryan Crocker. He was asked to look into the risks of a hypothetical invasion of Iraq. The resulting memo Crocker wrote was classified. It was titled "The Perfect Storm."

In it... Ambassador Crocker spelled out how the invasion of Iraq could be derailed. Ethnic and sectarian tensions would explode if Saddam's regime collapsed. And Crocker wrote how hard it would be for invading forces to create a new government.

But that didn't stop the administration. In March 2003... the U-S Military invaded Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein and find his alleged cache of weapons of mass destruction.

[Bush: "On my orders, coalition forces have begun striking selected targets of military importance to undermine Saddam Hussein's ability to wage war. These are opening stages of what will be a broad and concerted campaign."]

[MUSIC FADES]

Within a year... the war in Afghanistan was largely forgotten. And this new war in Iraq... seemed to be over. US forces captured Saddam Hussein. President Bush gave the infamous 'Mission Accomplished Speech'. Then the mission pivoted.

Over the next few years... U.S. Forces would try to stabilize the country during a brewing civil war

A few years later... the landscape looked far less triumphant... the claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction were debunked. An insurgency gained momentum. International forces were dwindling but the American presence was growing. President Bush later sent 20-thousand surge troops to curb the violence.

[Bush: “As terrorists are defeated, civil society takes root, and the Iraqis assume more control over their own security, our mission in Iraq will evolve. Over time our troops will shift from leading operations to partnering with Iraqi forces and eventually to overwatching those forces.”]

[MUSIC]

In 2007 President Bush appointed Ryan Crocker U.S. Ambassador to Iraq. He wrote “The Perfect Storm” memo we told you about earlier.

Crocker saw the wars in the middle east switch from military missions to nation-building ones. And he was concerned how few local partners the US actually had in both countries. Because to wage these wars... the US needed people who spoke the local languages. Afghanistan had dozens of languages and Iraq had its own languages and dialects.

[Crocker: “Language is absolutely indispensable, critical element in successful diplomacy, and ultimately in our own national security, and we are not great at it.”]

So Crocker says he relied on Iraqis. He hired them to fill the embassies and translate documents. And they served as liaisons between the Americans and the local populations.

[Crocker: “For anyone who has worked in an embassy, you figured out real quick, if we did not have loyal, dedicated, and capable foreign service nationals, we really would not have embassies, they’re absolutely vital to our function.”]

As the American presence grew... the local partners started to come under threat. Insurgents saw them as targets for blackmail, kidnapping, extortion and even murder.

In 2007... a married couple was working at the U-S Embassy in Baghdad. Their names were Hazim and Emel. They were kidnapped and killed because of their work at the Embassy.

[Crocker: “Hazim means determination and Emel means hope. If there is going to be hope for Iraqis, it starts inside these embassy walls. And I've gotta be determined to get something up so that something like this does not happen again.

It was seared into my mind and my memory. It still is.”]

[MUSIC FADES]

The situation in Iraq was getting worse. Colonel Steve Miska was a U-S Army Infantry Officer. At the end of 2006... he was on his second deployment to Iraq. Soldiers like him were tasked with trying to stabilize the country. To do that they fought the growing insurgency – Iraqis who were targeting and killing each other and U-S soldiers.

[Miska: “You had al-Qaeda in the hearts of the Sunni neighborhoods and you have Jaysh al-Mahdī, the Shia militia, in the hearts of the Shia neighborhoods. And they were ravaging the normal everyday people of the other populations.

But also we started putting combat outposts along the sectarian fault lines like a referee stepping between two boxers.”]

These groups lashed out at the Americans. And they set their sights on the Iraqi interpreters and translators who worked with them. To the insurgents... the translators were traitors.

But Miska says to the Americans... these interpreters... or terps as they were called... were essential.

[Miska: “The interpreters are our cultural eyes, ears and mouthpieces. And there were plenty of times when interpreters saved American service members' lives. So it might be with a gun, but nine times out of 10 it was going to be with their understanding and their ability to communicate, which we just didn't have.

[MUSIC FADES]

They're on patrol with us every day. They are sharing the same risks. At that time it was so lethal. I allowed our interpreters to carry weapons if they wanted to, which was a complete violation of what we were supposed to be doing, but I didn't care. Everybody needed to be able to defend themselves.”]

Col. Miska worked on base with a small contingent of about 50 interpreters. They had to live there because it was too dangerous to go home.

[Miska: “... At the time, interpreters did not show their faces. They wore face masks or some sort of hood or cloak to prevent their identity from being known.”]

And many of these Iraqis had to use fake names. That’s because Iraqi names include lots of information – like someone’s family or tribe. So these interpreters used what’s called a nom de guerre... a combat nickname. Col. Miska remembers one interpreter whom he called ‘Jack.’

[Miska: “So Jack was a quiet professional. Tall, thin, always on every patrol, never complained. That was important because there were a lot of interpreters that were scared, understandably so, and would draw a line and say, you know, ‘I'm not going on patrol.’

And Jack had absolutely no reservations about that.”]

So Jack went out on patrol often... walking side-by-side with American soldiers. Iraq was a cash-based society. So the interpreters would go home to give money – their salary – to their family.

Miska says one day Jack was stopped outside his home by a Sunni militia. They had seen him coming to and from the Green Zone. And accused him of working with the Americans.

[Miska: “and his dad intervened and his dad came and said: ‘Please son tell them that that's not true.’

Cause his alibi was always, he's attending the Iraqi police academy, which was a good excuse for why he spent so much time away from his wife and his family.”]

The militia made Jack swear on a Quran that he wasn’t working with the Americans... and they let him go. But a few months later... Col. Miska heard that Jack’s wife had given birth to stillborn twins. Jack said he had to leave to be with her.

[Miska: "... we begged him not to go home, cause we knew how risky it was, but he went home anyway.]

That's when his dad called us from Jack's cell phone as Jack was bleeding out in the street, and let us know that he was dead."]

[MUSIC FADES]

Shaker Jeffrey... the interpreter you heard from earlier... went by a couple different names. The first... was 'Michael.'

[Shaker: "My Sergeant, he was like, 'eh, you know what ... it's pretty much hard to pronounce your names ... it's hard for us Americans, so can I just call you Michael?' 'Like, okay, so you can do that.'"]

But Shaker was in a uniquely difficult position. Not only was his life in danger because he was an interpreter... but also because he was Yazidi. So when he was around the *Iraqi Army* and other interpreters... he used *another* name.

[Shaker: "The Iraqi army soldiers and officers, they were asking me, 'Hey, where's your name? Where are you from?' I was like, 'Hey, I'm Muslim. My name is Muhammad.']

And then they were happy with it, but because I couldn't say that I'm Yazidi. If they knew that I'm Yazidi, I'm done."]

At work... Shaker would translate conversations between American soldiers and Iraqis. He'd end up in strategy and intel meetings... and he would sit in and translate phone calls.

But a lot of his time was spent on raids... out on missions to capture or kill al-Qaeda and militia members. Shaker remembers one mission with an American intelligence officer. He was looking for anyone with intel on a local gang of insurgents. So he spray painted his phone number on walls across Mosul.

And it seemed to work. One day... a source came to the base... a 10-year-old boy. He told the Americans that he had seen a group of unfamiliar men carrying crates into a nearby cemetery.

Apparently... they were hiding explosives in a grave.

[Shaker: “They are hiding explosives in a cemetery, which was – nobody would expect them to do that.

And then at the night they were taking their explosives and doing their operations in our area and bombing them with Iraqis and Americans and local people.”]

Shaker translated the conversation and briefed the other soldiers. Then he went with a team to the cemetery.

They found the grave the boy told them about. So they started digging.

[Shaker: “The cemetery was between four empty buildings ...

So we started to dig the grave and you would not imagine how many explosive materials, C-4 and other materials we found there under the grave.”]

[PHOTOS SNAPPED]

The team pulled out the explosives. Then while they were taking pictures of everything to send back to command... they were attacked. Gunfire rang out from the buildings around the cemetery. They had walked right into an ambush.

[Shaker: “We got fired, like from all four directions... with a BKC, which is the machine gun, just like shooting on us ... I was like — the only way to be survived, I was like ‘try to hide under one of the grave...’”]

Shaker hid down in the grave while an American captain fired back. Shaker says he laid there for hours while bullets rained down around him. His team desperately tried to fight back.

Shaker says insurgents were scattered in the buildings around the cemetery.

[Shaker: “They were just shooting on us. So that was pretty tough. It was like everywhere ...

Took like an hour, two hours till they were able at the end to kill them.”]

Shaker got shot in the leg. He recovered from the injury... but he wasn't scared off. he was more determined than ever to serve with these Americans fighting in Iraq.

[Shaker: "That captain, he dedicated his life, covering me and try to fight for the others. You know?"

By doing that, I feel like, you know, I'm not just the terp, I'm one of them and they have a message, they have a mission.

If they are pulling their lives all the way from the other side of the oceans here to bring safety and stability to the people of Iraq, and I'm one of them, I'm just going to be like them.

So everyday going there, coming back, going there, coming back, then I started to have like a brave heart.

So you have missions. Be a man and finish that."]

[MUSIC FADES/SONIC TRANSITION]

As the fighting dragged on... stories of interpreters under threat started to get media attention.

The spotlight was spurring action back in D-C.

Sharon Waxman was the national security advisor to Senator Ted Kennedy. She says they were aware of the threat to interpreters. So Sen. Kennedy wanted to pass legislation. Something to help.

[Waxman: "So he felt that the United States had a moral obligation to facilitate exit from the country of those people whose lives were ruined, who had a legitimate share of persecution because of their association with the U-S.

That those are the people who had a bullet targeting them and they had a bullseye on their back."]

Waxman says they were doing research when they came across an existing program. Something called the Special Immigrant Visa... or S-I-V.

[MUSIC]

The Special Immigrant Visa was created way back in 1952. When the Senate passed the Immigration and Nationality Act. That law put quotas on the number of immigrants let into the U-S. Those quotas based on nationality or ethnicity.

But the law also had a preference system to let others in. A way for the U-S to welcome some immigrants based on their economic potential, skills, and education.

Eventually... the *Special Immigrant Visa* was born. It was made for foreign allies who helped the U-S accomplish missions abroad like embassy employees. But by 2006... the S-I-V for interpreters and translators was a rare prize. Congress only allocated 50 visas each year for Iraqi and Afghan interpreters.

So Sharon Waxman says when they found this program... Senator Kennedy thought it could be useful.

[Waxman: “Senator was looking for really any way to open the spigot to let more people into the United States. So we saw that law, which was about to expire, and thought it's not a perfect fit. That said, it's a war situation, it's chaos and we need to use every tool in our toolbox to let more people into this country.”]

While they started crafting legislation to expand the S-I-V... Sen. Kennedy got to work. Their office took up the cause for Iraqi translators and other refugees. But Sharon Waxman says the Bush White House was not on board.

The administration was telling one narrative of the war. That it was going well... and that the Iraqi people had been liberated.

[Waxman: “... So the idea that translators or foreign nationals, Iraqis who had worked for the state department or USAID might have a target on their backs as a result of their close association with the United States, was really inconsistent with the narrative.”]

Waxman says Sen. Kennedy wanted to flip that narrative when Democrats took control of the Senate in 2007. He invited an Iraqi translator to testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee. But... the translator was concerned for his safety and his family. So he testified behind a screen... no one could see his face.

[Kennedy: “... I’m gonna ask that the audience, members of the press, refrain from taking any pictures or video shooting of the witnesses during the testimony and I thank you for your cooperation...”]

[Sammy: “I’m a 27-year-old Sunni Arab from Mosul, Iraq ... In April 2003, shortly after US troops arrived in Mosul, I volunteered to work as an Iraqi translator ... I too have been targeted for my death. My name was listed on the doors of several mosques calling for my death, supposed friends of mine saw my name on the list and turned on me because they believed I was a traitor...”]

These hearings plus lob bying from nonprofits helped Congress expand the SIV program. They increased the yearly visa allotment from 50 to 500. Not a full or perfect solution... but Sharon Waxman says it was a good start.

[Waxman: “We wanted to increase it more than 500, however, to get the law through the Senate and the Congress, we had to compromise, so we started with 500.”]

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But the SIV program still wasn’t tailored to the dangerous situation in Iraq. The U-S embassy in Baghdad wasn’t scheduling interviews for SIV applicants. It was too dangerous. That meant Interpreters had to catch a flight to a nearby embassy in Jordan. But al-Qaeda and the other militias had infiltrated the airport’s security.

It was a built-in Catch-22. So with Congress working on the SIV program back in D-C... someone needed to up the pressure.

[Crocker: “We all hate leaks to the media, unless we support them in specific cases.”]

That’s Ambassador Ryan Crocker again. At that time he was working out of the US embassy in Baghdad.

Ambassador Crocker knew the SIV program well... he had issued some SIVs to embassy employees in the past.

[Crocker: “It has been a means by which the Department of State could reward or express appreciation to long-time embassy, national employees ...]

But he says the program didn't have a lot of resources. And it wasn't tailored to applicants under security threats... so the State Department didn't have any urgency when processing applications.

[Crocker: "It was a good operation, but it was boutique when we needed mass market."]

So in September 2007... Crocker sent a cable to the State Department. It was titled "Iraqi Refugee Processing: Can We Speed It Up?"

[Crocker: "And I had deliberately sent that cable in unclassified, so there would be no security issues or infractions involved if it did get out, because I thought it would need to get out."]

The cable did leak...

Here's Sharon Waxman again.

[Waxman: "A memo like that doesn't get leaked lightly. He was brave. There were a lot of people who were being creative in getting information out of the administration.

I mean, people were doing it in the intelligence community. You read the New York Times and people were screaming through the New York Times. So it was a really extraordinary time where everyone needed to just read between the lines."]

That's when the gears finally started to move in D-C. Senator Kennedy... with bipartisan support from Republican senators like Joe Lieberman and Gordon Smith got his bill attached to the National Defense Authorization Act. President Bush signed it into law in early 2008. Now 5,000 SIVs per year were going to be available for Iraqi partners.

[Waxman: "Was the program perfect? Not even close. Was there room for improvement? Absolutely. Did the program need to process people more quickly? Without a doubt. At the same time we created a program in the middle of a war zone at a time when an administration had a different narrative. So I think Senator Kennedy felt enormously proud of what he was able to accomplish by opening that window for Iraqis."]

In 2009... the same language from the Iraq SIV program was put in place for Afghanistan.

At the urging of Senator Ben Cardin ... Congress passed The Afghan Allies Protection Act. Now Afghan interpreters and translators were eligible for 1,500 SIVs per year.

[MUSIC FADES]

Around this time... Shaker Jeffery was working as an interpreter back in Iraq. He was talking to another translator from his village who told Shaker about the SIV.

[Shaker: “So he's told me about this program, he said ‘There's a program, you can apply for it. And then you would get a visa and go to work to stay in the United States.’

I was like, ‘you're bullshitting.’”]

So Shaker started filling out all the paperwork... form after form.

[Shaker: “Then the first step was, it was a form DS-157. I filled that, I send that, they got a reply, and then they send me I-360, I fill that, I will send it.

And everybody said, ‘hey, there's a form that you need, Chief of mission approval. I fill that, I will send it back to Baghdad.’”]

Shaker got approval from command. Now he was getting excited. It looked like he finally had a chance to go to the United States.

[Shaker: “I did a medical test and everything, I was just like ready to go. But then nothing happened....”]

US troops started to withdraw from Iraq in 2009. Shaker's American friends went home... and he was waiting for *his* chance to leave. He had seemingly cleared every hurdle to get his visa.

But at the last step... his appointment to actually pick it up... nothing happened. Shaker said he reached out to the U-S Embassy... then the International Office of Migration.

[Shaker: “I was reaching out, I was sending emails to them. I'll try to reach out, but they didn't help me.”]

Eventually he got in touch with officials at The Pentagon and even Central Command. Shaker was on the phone pleading his case... and the Americans he served with

contact representatives in Congress. They were desperately looking for anyone to get Shaker to the U-S.

[Shaker: “I described with all my heart. I described just like the perfect picture on what’s going on ... who else can help me more than a general at the Pentagon or Central Operations?

And then I asked them, they couldn’t help me.

There are some senators that I'm talking to, they're not helping me. There are some, like a Congressman that I'm talking to, they're not helping me. So it was like all the time, ‘Hey, you deserve to come here. And I think we will do our best,’

But nothing happened.”]

Shaker fought for his case. But the bulk of U-S forces had withdrawn by 20-12.

A few years later... ISIS stormed Shaker’s village. They slaughtered thousands of Yazidis in a genocide.

Shaker and most of his family fled to Germany. That’s where he is today. He’s tried to revisit his SIV case a few times. But now that he’s out of Iraq... the US government told him he’s no longer in danger. And that he’s ineligible for his SIV.

To this day... he doesn’t know what went wrong with his case. He’s since made a new life for himself... but every now and then... Shaker still thinks about the chance he had to come to the U-S and live alongside those he served with.

[Shaker: “I feel like if I were there, I would be a perfect American citizen, because this is something that my personality, love to do, since I was a little kid. That is something that I grew up with the same dream.

Why not me with their love Americans and love the system, love America. And to be a true Patriot American, like they could take me or what would I do wrong? Nothing.

So in a way to be honest with you, I felt I was left behind. Even the program was like not leaving anyone behind.

So to be honest, hurt, stayed with me and it will hurt like the last day of my life...”]

[Allies Theme]

We'll spend the next few episodes diving into the S-I-V program and cases like this. In order to find out what's kept thousands of Iraqi and Afghan interpreters from getting to the U-S.

Next time on Allies... we'll head back to Afghanistan where we'll follow one interpreter. An Afghan called "Fred" who fought side-by-side with American soldiers for more than a decade.

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Allies was created, written and produced by the show's Lead Producers Max Johnston... and me, Bryce Klehm.

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Senior Producers at Goat Rodeo are Megan Nadolski and Ian Enright.

At Lawfare... editorial support from Natalie Orpett, Katherine Pompilio, Claudia Swain and Scott Anderson.

A special thanks to Ambassador Ryan Crocker, Col. Steve Miska and his book "The Baghdad Underground Railroad", Sharon Waxman, and Shaker Jeffery.

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