

Will I return to Kenya alive? Life and death in war-ravaged Baghdad

I am in my hotel room in the heart of Baghdad, Iraq. It is Tulip Royal Hotel, the venue for CNN broadcasts on the cusp of the fall of President Saddam Hussein. It is my second day here. From the window of my room on the 10th floor I have a partial panoramic view of this city, from where Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq with an iron fist for 24 years. I have just learnt with shock that I couldn't leave the hotel compound.

It was a chilling epiphany during a buffet breakfast when Fatima, a Moroccan waitress, gave me a glimpse of what it means living and dying in Baghdad. She had displayed unusual friendliness towards the patrons in a hotel where staff were amiable but kept a safe uneasy distance from their clients. When you arrive in Iraq, you are greeted with a great sense of righteous suspicion, which the affability of the hard-working hotel workers could hardly disguise. The clients in the restaurant are there for strictly breakfast only, they avoid eye contact and any possibility of a chit-chat with a stranger.

"I came here four years ago," Fatima had told me, "I am now married to a Jordanian, but we have decided this is not the place to have children. That will wait."

"Can I venture out of this hotel and meet real Iraqis?" I ask.

"If you leave, you will not come back. My husband and I live here at the hotel and only go out to the shopping mall once a month, that is it."

She then referred me to the manager, a suave middle-aged man whose manner epitomises the very essence of human kindness. He told me calmly and friendly, "You can leave but you won't be allowed back in the hotel. The hotel is in the green security zone."

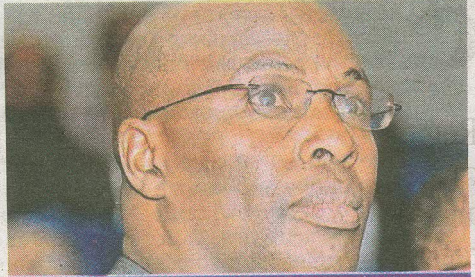
I am, therefore, in the hotel room, mulling over my folly of accepting an invitation to participate in a conference on terrorism in a precarious Baghdad. Had I chosen the risk of being blown into smithereens in Baghdad over being shot in the head in Dusit Hotel in Nairobi?

The African-Arab Council had graciously invited me to present a paper titled; "Where lightning strikes more than twice: Kenya as the theatre of terrorism," all expenses taken care of. The theme of the conference, "World without Terrorism", underpins the natural human longing for freedom from terror.

I do a belated and frantic Google search for "security in Baghdad". The US travel advisory springs to the screen: "Do not travel to Iraq due to terrorism and armed conflict," it screams. The travel advisory continues, "If you decide to travel to Iraq: Draft a will and designate appropriate insurance beneficiaries; Discuss a plan with loved ones regarding care/custody of children, pets, property, belongings, non-liquid assets (collections, artwork, etc), funeral wishes, etc; Share important documents, login information, and points of contact with loved ones so that they can manage your affairs if you are unable to return as planned to the United States."

I am petrified. I am not a citizen of the US, but I quickly substitute US for Kenya. I should have drafted a will before leaving Kenya, yes, discussed with my people about inheritance and property distribution and made my funeral arrangements. Yes, I should have shared important documents and login information just in case returning to Kenya alive turns out to be an impossibility.

Later in the evening the conference organisers arrive. We are gathered at the lobby, representatives from African and Arab countries. Now we can leave the hotel, but no one tells us where we are headed. We are moved in a tightly guarded convoy with other vehicles being moved out of the way for us as we bypass a myriad security checks manned by the hawk-eyed Iraqi army. I am in the front seat



KEN WALIBORA

For the next two more days, we would be escorted from the hotel to this venue and back in a heavily guarded convoy. We face each day clueless about the schedule ahead. You have no clue who will speak next or when or whether you will speak at all"

of a Land Cruiser and behind me there is Prof Joseph Chisasa of South Africa (who knows something about how terrorists are funded) and Prof Usman Bugaje from Nigeria (who has deep insight into the workings of Boko Haram ravaging western Africa). Along the road there are hefty concrete barricades such as I have never seen in my life.

We enter the Hikma Centre, home of the National Wisdom Movement headed by Ammar al-Hakim, venue for the conference on terrorism. For the next two more days, we would be escorted from the hotel to this venue and back in a heavily guarded convoy. We face each day clueless about the schedule ahead. You have no clue who will speak next or when or whether you will speak at all. Prof Bugaje is nudged to present on where terrorists get their finances minutes before presentation time. I incite him to defy the instructions and instead talk about what he knows best, that is Boko Haram, and he surprises me by following my (mis) advice, Prof Chisasa, who is the expert on finance, remains muted throughout the conference.

We are served sumptuous food by men; Iraq is "a men only country". It is men who dominate the conference — Arabic-speaking men and high-ranking Iraqi military men. The talk on combating terrorism is really about Iraqi chest-thumping over silencing the nefarious ISIS terror.

We are taken on a guided tour of a secret military facility where commemoration of the defeat of ISIS is the theme. And you have no clue where you are headed until you arrive there. We see pictures and real ISIS paraphernalia — mobile phones, computers, a portable radio studio, hard drives, missile launchers, rifles, machetes, etc.

The apex of all this is a horrifying video of ISIS beheading victims, burning Jordanian pilots alive and destroying historical monuments and then the eventual defeat of the terror group. This is the climax of the narrative and leitmotif of military victory over terrorism. Yet, upon talking to the one and only ordinary Iraqi on the sidelines of the conference, he tells me: "No! the military did not defeat ISIS; it was the people who said enough is enough and took the terror group head-on."

As the curtains of the chest-thumping conference come down and I am handed my participation certificate, I keep wondering: Is ISIS really dead? Is Iraq out of the woods of terrorism yet? Will I return to Kenya alive or dead?

Prof Walibora is the director of the Global and Language Studies Centre at Riara University; kwwalibora@gmail.com