

Mais Al Bayaa Part 2 Transcript

Mais Al Bayaa: It was just everything was black. The smell of dust, blood and flesh, burning flesh. I kept screaming, "is there anyone alive?" and I would not hear anyone. I genuinely thought I was dead.

Ramita Navai: From *Aurra Studios*. This is **The Line of Fire** with me, Ramita Navai. I've been working in conflict zones around the world for nearly two decades. And in this series, I talk to fellow journalists about covering war and the life changing moments of confronting death. Welcome to **The Line of Fire**.

In this episode of the Line of Fire, we continue my chat with multi award-winning Iraqi journalist - and my sometime work wife - Mais Al Bayaa.

If you missed the first part of our conversation, I would really recommend you go and listen to it. In it Mais explains why her family was exiled from Iraq by Saddam Hussein, what life was like during the first and second gulf wars, as well as living on Iraq's road of death where she wasn't even safe in her own bed.

We pick up in this episode talking about the moment that changed her life forever.

Ramita Navai: It was November the 18th, 2005. And you were working with the US TV network NBC at the time, at the Alhambra hotel in Baghdad. Tell me what happened.

Mais Al Bayaa: Our office was based in the Alhambra hotel in central Baghdad. We knew through different Intel that a suicide bomber was going to come to the hotel and blow up himself or herself. So we were coming every single day to the office, looking at each other, not knowing who is going to wear the vest and blow himself up inside the hotel. But we had to continue to do that job because there's no other way.

Ramita Navai: So you knew the hotel was...

Mais Al Bayaa: A target.

Ramita Navai: going to get attacked. Was there any talk to move to another hotel to move base?

Mais Al Bayaa: No, because two other hotels were blown up just before our hotel. So there were no other places. So it was multiple incidents. And that is how we actually gathered as well, the information, because there was a Palestine hotel explosion, which I believe was Reuters and I think at that time it was CBS in that building.

So there were a couple of incidents. We were not the first. So we just knew that something's going to happen, but we didn't know when and how.

On The 17th I had a night shift and my mother on that day insisted that she would come and stay with me in my room.

She knew of course about what was happening, but she didn't know that there is a threat to our building. And I had to accept and I said, "it's fine. It's just going to be Friday". And anyway, Fridays are quiet because there are no newspapers in the morning to translate. And most people are just going to be chilling.

Ramita Navai: Friday is like the Sunday in the west. Day of rest.

Mais Al Bayaa: So, yes. So, Friday was just the day of rest. Local newspapers, they are not released on Friday morning. So I was sleeping and actually up at 7:00 AM, but I felt like I didn't need to go upstairs in the office because there were no newspapers to translate.

I might as well just stay chilled. At probably 8:00 AM or half past eight, I was still in bed. And then the explosion happened. A Suicide car bomb just came from the first gate, from the front gate. And I just see like a storm just coming towards us, the windows and the curtains were just falling on us, me and my mom in the room just like a whole wave of sand, just coming our way.

So I took my mom and I ran and I just put her in the bathroom because of course this is going to be the safest place because they have no windows. And I said, "mom, please stay in the bathroom until I come. Don't ever move from here". My clothes were next to the window actually. So I needed to change my pyjamas.

And I went just to pick up my clothes next to the window, and then a second suicide car bomb got blown off again. And it threw me across the room. So I fell on my knees and my mom was screaming and dragging me to the bathroom. I changed my clothes very quickly. And I opened the door.

The door was already half-cracked. So I pushed the door and I forced it open. And it was just everything was black. The smell of dust, blood and flesh, burning flesh.

And it was very weird quietness after that. I genuinely thought I was dead. I kept screaming, "is there anybody alive?" and I would not hear anyone. And I was on the third floor and my office was on the ninth floor. So I had to run to the ninth floor to see my colleagues.

I didn't see anyone, everyone was hiding. Everyone was scared. And I went to my office and I saw a huge piece of concrete, literally on my chair. And I kept looking at it and thinking only if I had been there, I would be gone. And just after that, the number of bullets were just flying everywhere.

So what the insurgents did is that they had two suicide car bombs. And after that, they tried to break into the building and wanted to take us hostages. So I had to run and just go and pick up my mom. And at least we are going higher and hopefully if

anything happens, then at least the Americans can pick up from the helicopters and we can escape.

Ramita Navai: So higher in the hotel?

Mais Al Bayaa: In the hotel. But I was feeling ashamed. How could I do that to my mother? To put her in that position. I kept looking at my chair and looking at everything around me and how everything was just in pieces. And that moment I said this is not how I want to end. This must stop. But it didn't stop there.

This is not even how bad it was.

Ramita Navai: At this point do you know if anyone's been killed?

Mais Al Bayaa: No, but I keep smelling flesh and I see bones and flesh in the swimming pool of the building.

But I don't know who they belong to.

The security of NBC had installed different cameras around the building. They have CCTV footage of the surroundings and they wanted to know exactly what was happening.

This was not live footage. This was footage recorded before the incident because just after the explosion, there were no cameras anymore.

All of the cameras have got blown up.

So we just wanted to see what happened before the first incident. And if anybody had already walked into the building, we could suspect that they might be, you know, insurgents who are now in our building. So I brought the receptionist to the NBC security and I said, can you help us to recognize the people?

There's one guy who was wearing, a leather jacket and just walking peacefully towards the building. And he stops and turns on his right. And just looks at someone who's sitting in his van. And after that the bombing happened and that's it. This is the end of the footage.

Ramita Navai: And so the person that you were watching in the leather jacket, he was just an innocent bystander.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes just a bystander. So we kind of wanted to at least know who this person is. And we brought the receptionist to look at it. And then when he looked at it he started laughing and he kept asking us to repeat the footage. [Mais cries] And it turned out it was his son. He was just laughing saying, "Now I know why he's not picking up the phone."

And after that, this receptionist continued to work. And he refused to take any time off. And we had to be tortured by seeing him in the morning, every morning, coming in and outside the office. And he doesn't want to have any mercy towards him. He doesn't want us to show any sympathy and he wants to be strong.

And that really made our life hell, like even seeing him every single morning.

Ramita Navai: And he didn't break down?

Mais Al Bayaa: No. He was just laughing. He was anxiously laughing and he just felt like he couldn't cry.

Ramita Navai: What was his son doing? What had his son been doing?

Mais Al Bayaa: His son actually was working in the building. He was, I believe, working in the bakery in the building.

Ramita Navai: So he was just coming to work?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes.

Ramita Navai: And you happened to show him this footage and he happened to watch his son being blown to pieces?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes. And I had to translate for him. And I was just choking. I couldn't, I couldn't, I couldn't breathe. And he kept saying, "No, no, it's okay. Don't worry about it. That's life." And just kept moving on.

But I felt like I can't live this, this can't be my mother. And I can't be the one who actually sees my mother like this. So I have to decide something. I had to leave.

Ramita Navai: Where did you sleep that night?

Mais Al Bayaa: I went back home and yeah, the next day I came to the office, like nothing happened, just picking up the rubble and getting a new chair, a new computer and setting up the office, like nothing happened.

Ramita Navai: You continued as usual, as normal?

Mais Al Bayaa: Just as usual.

Ramita Navai: Had something happened inside you?

Mais Al Bayaa: I almost felt like that piece of concrete fell on my heart. That is kind of that moment. I cannot erase it from my head. I felt something really died in me.

Ramita Navai: How did that experience change you?

Mais Al Bayaa: It made me more determined to change my destiny. I understood at that moment, this is no longer an imaginary door in a wall. That door now I have to literally break it to pieces and get out. That's exactly how I felt. And that is I think, why it builds that determination on me facing my fear.

Despite having anxiety. I still have to face it. That kind of made me who I am now.

Ramita Navai: Did that experience change your perspective on life?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes. It made me think I cannot take anything for granted. As I said, I have to live my day as if I'm going to be dead tomorrow. It made me feel like every single time I say goodbye to my family. I might not open the door again. So I want to be good to myself and to my family. That's what made me feel like.

Ramita Navai: What did it teach you about yourself?

Mais Al Bayaa: It told me that I am a survivor. I thought my life was so ordinary. I thought that I'm just going to accept whatever comes to me. But that actually changed me.

Ramita Navai: Did it feel empowering to feel like a survivor?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah, because you're taking your own destiny.

Ramita Navai: So in a way, it's funny, isn't it? An incident like that where you have absolutely no control over your life made you feel that you could be in control of your life?

Mais Al Bayaa: Well, you don't have control over what happens to you, but you have control of how you react to it. And that is exactly what it taught me. That just because something bad happened to me, doesn't make me a weak person, but I am going to be weak if I'm going to surrender to it.

Ramita Navai: Do you think anything good came out of it?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes it did because it made me who I am. Sometimes I wish I was a girl who grew up in east London and maybe I am an accountant or someone who's doing an admin job somewhere peaceful. But then I look at myself and I say, I don't think I would have that will to survive if I didn't have this experience. So I'm grateful for it.

Ramita Navai: Are you really?

Mais Al Bayaa: I am grateful because you have to reconcile with your past. Again, I don't want to feel defeated. I can't change it. So I might as well be grateful to the good things that come out of it.

Ramita Navai: Would you change it if you could?

Mais Al Bayaa: Change of being there?

You know what, I never dare to ask myself that question. Because I think I don't want to feel weak.

Ramita Navai: Do you think if that hadn't happened, you'd be sitting here with me now in England living a very different life?

Mais Al Bayaa: Maybe. I mean, who knows? I would have been your hairdresser, although I would never trust myself doing any of that job.

Ramita Navai: I don't think I would have trusted you **[Mais laughs]** with my hair as much I love you Mais.

Mais Al Bayaa: But I mean, it definitely exposed me to a very rich life, which is why I'm saying I am grateful for it.

Ramita Navai: Mais, there was another moment, another incident that caused you to leave.

Mais Al Bayaa: So one of the things that actually made me decide to leave, when I was working for one of the American networks in Baghdad, I was looking for Saddam Hussein's lawyer. I was looking because Saddam Hussein's trial was about to start. So we wanted to know who the lawyer is and what does he look like?

And we were hoping to get an exclusive interview with him. And, so I was looking all around to find him. And then I was interviewing a lawyer for another thing. And I said, I don't know if you might know the lawyers of Saddam Hussein? Do you know how I can find them? And he said, well, if I would go to the law syndicate and just pull their files from the archive.

So I did. So I went to the syndicate and I said, I just want to get the files for the lawyers of Saddam Hussein. At that time, there were 13 lawyers and the guy looked at me and he said, why are you looking for the archives? They are just standing in front of you. And I was like, are you serious? So I just ran to them. And I said...

Ramita Navai: All of the lawyers were there?

Mais Al Bayaa: All of the lawyers were there and the top lawyer was Khalil al-Duleimi and he was representing Saddam Hussein. So I went straight up to him

and I said, "Excuse me, I want to talk with the lawyers of Saddam Hussein." And I was acting as if I didn't know who they were.

And I said, "I don't know where to find them?" And he said, "No, you're looking exactly at them. And you know who we are. Tell me now quickly who you are." And I said, "Yeah, my name is Mais and I'm working for NBC." And I was trying to muck it in a way that they will think it's MBC the Saudi channel...

Ramita Navai: Rather than an American channel?

Mais Al Bayaa: Rather than an American channel, because you know, they were presenting Saddam Hussein.

So the guy literally starts shouting at me and he's like "You're working with the infidels, you're working with the traitors." And he was about to pull his gun and he's like, "I need to kill her right now. She's working with the traitors."

Ramita Navai: He said that?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes.

Ramita Navai: And how did you know he was about to pull out his gun?

Mais Al Bayaa: Well, his gun is in his pocket. He's like in his pocket. So he was literally putting his hand on his trigger and he was just about to pull his gun from his pocket. And he was like, "We have to kill her now."

And I froze, I didn't know what to do. I wasn't even there with a high-risk person. My driver was outside the syndicate waiting for me.

Ramita Navai: You were there alone?

Mais Al Bayaa: I was just there alone. I was standing in the middle alone and I just froze. I didn't know what to say.

And, just in the heated moment, when, you know, he heard about the Americans, he got really angry, but then within seconds, he calmed down and said, "No, hold on, hold on. We should not kill her. She needs to tell the Americans what Saddam Hussein thinks of them and what is really happening in his cell. So from now we are actually going to tell you what Saddam Hussein says, and you can tell the Americans what he feels about them." And I said, "yeah, that will be great". **[Both laugh]** I just want to get out.

And, he took my number and I left the building and I was shaking. So when I went back to my bureau and I told them what happened, they were looking at me like, are

you crazy? Did this just happen? And I said, “Yes. But actually from now on, we can have unlimited access to the lawyers”. And it was by luck that this has happened.

Ramita Navai: And do you think it was by luck that he didn't kill you? Do you think he could have killed you?

Mais Al Bayaa: Oh yeah. I mean, his eyes had zero mercy. I could see the anger in his eyes and I'm thinking, oh God, I'm gone now.

Ramita Navai: Did you ever speak to him again?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes. I spoke to him many times afterwards.

Ramita Navai: On the telephone?

Mais Al Bayaa: On the telephone only. He calls me and tells me what Saddam Hussein is doing.

Like when he was on hunger strikes or when he's not happy about the prosecution or things like that. So I was very lucky to have that, but actually it turned against me later on because the lawyers of Saddam Hussein were targeted.

They start to get targeted after the start of the trial of Saddam Hussein. So two lawyers were targeted, one was killed and the other was injured. So I called the injured lawyer just to check on him and to get some information of course. The lawyer told me, “Listen Mais, actually now we have to draw a list of all of the journalists we were in touch with. And we think that they were leaking information about our whereabouts or they are kind of knowing our location by knowing our phone numbers.” So now, the insurgency at that time who are supporting Saddam Hussein and the lawyers, they're going to start to target all of the journalists who were in touch with the lawyers.

And he said, “Your name is at the top of the list. So if I were you, I would leave today before tomorrow.”

Ramita Navai: So you were on a hit list?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah.

Ramita Navai: What did you do?

Mais Al Bayaa: Well, I didn't know what to do because if I tell my channel, they're going to give me, you know, a week or two off and I will have to hide again inside the country because I have nowhere to go. And then after that I have to come back like nothing happened. So that actual call happened on Wednesday.

I fled the country on Friday.

But the insurgents, once you're on their hit list, you're on their hit list until you're gone.

Ramita Navai: So what happened from the minute you heard that news to when you left and how did you plan it?

Mais Al Bayaa: I sat with my bureau chief at that time and I said, "Actually, I am looking to take a course and study in the UK. And I would really appreciate it if I could get a letter from you to tell them that I am your employee. And I'm looking to just go and do the course on my expenses, not on yours. And I will just travel to the UK".

So I might as well just travel to the UK at least for three or six months until things calm down or things change. And she luckily agreed to write me this letter and gave it to me. So I booked a flight and I went to Jordan to apply for a UK visa because the British consulate was not even working in Iraq because it was too dangerous at that time.

Ramita Navai: And did your parents know?

Mais Al Bayaa: At that time? No.

Ramita Navai: Did you tell anybody?

Mais Al Bayaa: Just my best friends, because the problem is that when you tell your parents about these things, that you are going to stay in another country, you don't know what they're going to react like, and you are just going to pass them your anxiety.

So there's no point - they can't change anything. It's not like you're a child in a school and tell them you got bullied. So you know that they can't help you. And actually they are even more helpless than me in that situation. So I had to take responsibility for it on my own.

Ramita Navai: How did you feel as you were flying out?

Mais Al Bayaa: I didn't even get the visa very easily. I mean, I got rejected.

I applied for a student visa and after weeks they actually refused my visa and at the embassy they handed me my passport and said, "Oh, your passport was cancelled because you have a fake passport."

I said, are you serious? It's a bloody Iraqi passport. Who would fake an Iraqi passport? I mean, do I look like Saddam Hussein? Or Uday Saddam Hussein? I

mean, why would I fake this? If I want to fake a passport, at least I would get something that could get me further than an Iraqi passport. So anyway, they cancelled my passport and gave me the rejection letter.

My mother kept calling me, asking me what happened to my visa? And I didn't want to say that I got rejected because she would tell me, just come back home. So instead I said, well, the embassy is closed.

They're just repainting it. My mother used to call me every single day and say is the paint dry? And I said, no, it rained again. **[Mais laughs]** So they had to repaint it again. And I kept bluffing my parents because I just wanted to leave. And I thought that this is going to be my last chance, I was just sitting, waiting every single day not knowing what's going to happen to my life.

And I was just about to book a flight back home, but then I thought about it. If this is happening and this is 2006, what's going to happen in 2012? If I'm treated like this now, God knows what I'm going to be treated like in 2012. So I decided to go back to the Iraqi embassy and apply for a new passport and go back again to the British embassy and say if you are refusing me on the grounds of a fake passport, here's a new passport.

They grant me a visa, a student visa, and I flew to London straight away.

Ramita Navai: Mais, how do you now cope with the trauma? Because there is trauma. Talking to you now I can, you know, I can see it in your face, the pain of having these experiences, having lived through that war. How do you cope with that?

Mais Al Bayaa: I go through therapy. Sometimes I use sports to just channel my anger. And sometimes I just have to kind of visualise it and keep saying to myself, that was the past. You're no longer trapped. You are free now to choose your own destiny. And there's something about trauma and control.

Once you have control over your trauma, you can actually manage it. But of course, some nights I can't.

Ramita Navai: Is it always there? Is it something you've learned to live with?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah. I mean, I say to my friends, I cannot remember the night that I put my head on a pillow and just fell asleep. I envy anyone who actually can do that.

And I think about things now that I have a daughter. So when I see my daughter, I keep fearing that it could have been her that had to go through all of the trauma that I have gone through. Well thank God, it was me. And I think having a child outside a war zone, it really allowed me to feel that I am in control. And I managed to change my life and not just my life, but my future family as well.

Ramita Navai: A very beautiful, gorgeous daughter might I add. Has having your little girl changed anything now? Has it changed the kind of stories you cover?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah.

Ramita Navai: Tell me.

Mais Al Bayaa: She actually pushed me to be even braver.

Since the moment she was in my body. She really taught me a lot. And I think she's probably one of the main reasons why I am trying to overcome my trauma.

Ramita Navai: **[PROMO BREAK]** *Hello, it's Ramita Navai here. And thank you for listening to my show. I hope you agree that these stories are not only powerful but important. As I speak to some incredible journalists from around the world about what they've learned from working in dangerous places and how it's changed their perspective it would be great to get your help in sharing their personal stories.*

So please do spread the word and subscribe, rate, and review the show wherever you get your podcasts. I hope you continue to be inspired by the series. And I look forward to you joining me for more episodes.

Ramita Navai: Do you think that is an issue with doing our job that there's such high adrenaline, even when it is traumatic, that it's hard to adjust to a mundane, normal life back here?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah, absolutely. I think it's Stockholm syndrome.

It's that love relationship with a very abusive situation. I know that what we are doing is for the good, but it's actually really abusive to us. It's not abusive to others. But we are no longer the same people once we hit the war zones and once we see what we see. We cannot erase it from our brains and our memories.

Ramita Navai: Do you think it's addictive?

Mais Al Bayaa: Absolutely.

Ramita Navai: Are you addicted?

Mais Al Bayaa: No. I tell you why, because I only now go after a story that really my heart and soul falls for. I no longer just go to cover war just for the sake of being there. I'm very content where I am.

Ramita Navai: And you ended up back in Iraq. How did that feel?

Was it different the second time round?

Mais Al Bayaa: The first time actually I had only three days. I could not sleep. Day and night. My anxiety was at its peak.

It almost felt like the door was going to shut again. I had the same fear of the door being shut, and I had to keep reminding myself that this is not going to happen again. Don't have this fear. So I had to fight it and I intentionally wanted to fight it because I wanted to break that cycle.

If I don't break it, no one else can break it for me.

Ramita Navai: So would you say in a way you needed to face your demons?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah.

Ramita Navai: And the big demon was Iraq?

Mais Al Bayaa: Oh, the big demon was absolutely Iraq. It was haunting me. And it's like, you know, you're drawn to it, but you can't go and you know, if you're going to go, it's like, almost like, you know, being drawn to the electricity and you could actually be electrocuted. I keep saying, like this time I'm going to be armed, so it's not going to do the same thing to me.

Ramita Navai: Well, we met in 2016. The war against ISIS was raging and we were making a documentary in Iraq about what was happening behind the war against ISIS. And we were investigating the Shia militias together. And watching you operate in Iraq you were just a fish in water. I mean, it is quite extraordinary the way, first of all, you deal with very stressful situations because I know that you get very stressed and anxious. And I can only tell because I know you so well, so I can see it in your eyes otherwise no one else would be able to tell.

Mais Al Bayaa: Thank you.

Ramita Navai: You're as cool as a cucumber, but I know that it's still difficult for you dealing with stressful situations. How do you manage to keep it together like that?

Mais Al Bayaa: I keep saying to myself that, as I said, I have to face it. And for me Iraq is a very personal and important story. And I want to give it justice. You have two types of people who are covering it. I mean, of course there are more than two people, but the majority are actually the two categories.

It's people who are living inside and they get intimidated and they cannot report the right thing because they fear retaliation, and people who are from the outside and they don't know anything about this story and they just don't really care sometimes. Of course, I mean, some, they do care, but they don't really know the story.

And then they go in and they get the story, whatever it is and they get out. So I have the luxury of being in between where I am an insider but I'm an outsider I can go in, I can get what anyone else can get inside the country if they have the courage to report it. But at the same time, I can just get out.

Ramita Navai: And you don't have to live with the consequences, which is very powerful because you can now do stories that local Iraqi journalists can't do for their own security and safety.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes. And that is why I think that as well, because I have this gift right now, I have to use it. I cannot just sit down and watch and just say, I don't care. You know, I've gone out, I escaped.

Ramita Navai: And it's funny that when we were working together, there were incidences that you can be in the same crew, but that I will find frightening that maybe you wouldn't, that you would find frightening that I wouldn't. And there was one incident. Well, we were taken by a commander, a Shia militia commander, took us to a secret prison.

And it was one of these black prisons. Nobody was supposed to know of its existence. It was illegal. They were holding a whole load of Sunni men, so a sectarian issue right here in front of us and the commander took us in. And I know that you were particularly scared when we were doing this. Tell me about that.

Mais Al Bayaa: Well, when the commander, we were driving from just the borders of where ISIS were at that time. And then we were supposed to go straight away to the Tikrit province in Iraq.

And the commander decided to change the route.

Ramita Navai: We had been with the Shia militia commander hadn't we, been interviewing him.

Mais Al Bayaa: And we've been interviewing him. We pushed the questions.

Ramita Navai: You kept telling me off for pushing the questions. **[Both laugh]** You kept jabbing me in my ribs.

Mais Al Bayaa: And I kept saying, just take it easy. And, as you being you, not listening and kept saying, okay, well we will push it. So then after that, the commander decided to actually take us off-road and he managed to take us to secret prison and said...

Ramita Navai: Which was completely unexpected. I mean, we'd been investigating these secret prisons.

Everybody had told us they exist, but you're never going to see one. And actually people were questioning their existence because there was no evidence.

And then all of a sudden, we're in the middle of a desert with this Iraqi Shia militia commander that I've been interrogating and you've been giving me the stink eye **[Both laugh]** and jabbing me saying we're with a really dangerous guy. What are you doing Ramita? And we're suddenly being driven off into the middle of the desert to a secret prison. I mean, I remember us looking at each other. Do you remember Mais?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah. Well, I said to you like, you know, we'd better get off with dignity than actually being dragged and just walked out of the car. So we walked in and then suddenly...

Ramita Navai: You were scared that they were going to drag us into that prison. And...

Mais Al Bayaa: Well exactly. It's, you know, we weren't going to the police, there is not even a phone connection and...

Ramita Navai: Yeah. There was nothing.

Mais Al Bayaa: There was nothing, it was in the middle of nowhere.

And you could scream for hours and no one would hear you. And when we walk in inside the prison we find more than a hundred, almost a, yeah, more than a hundred of prisoners.

Ramita Navai: very scared

Mais Al Bayaa: and very scared

Ramita Navai: malnourished looking prisoners

Mais Al Bayaa: and even children. And there were some children actually screaming on the first floor in that building.

And I kept looking at the fear in these men, looking at us, not knowing what on Earth we are doing here.

And the commander kept saying, if you ever get any of these images outside this room, you will all be killed.

Ramita Navai: And so we hadn't taken the camera. We'd been told no cameras. And yeah, he was a pretty threatening guy, this commander. We were just, as far as we knew, we were just walking around, having a look. Pretty shit scared.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah. And then, actually one of our team was in the back behind us. He put his phone in his pocket and he started filming everything.

Ramita Navai: And this was one of our local team, an Iraqi, which I mean that makes it even more dangerous.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah

Ramita Navai: We didn't know, did we, that he was filming this all?

Mais Al Bayaa: No.

Ramita Navai: Did he know that the commander was threatening us all with death if pictures of this place came out?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes, he did. And he didn't care. He just did it for us because he really wanted to have this footage come out.

Ramita Navai: He believed so strongly didn't he? It's funny because he's a Shia.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah.

Ramita Navai: And the commander was a Shia and he believed so strongly that Shias should not be doing this.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah. And then after that we finished the tour inside the prison. And then after that, we went out to do an interview with the commander who was bragging about how they keep their prisoners healthy and they are not tortured.

Ramita Navai: Oh, I remember that. He was very happy with himself.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah And he,

Ramita Navai: Because they didn't torture them.

Mais Al Bayaa: And he said

Ramita Navai: didn't he say they only hit them?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah. He said, no, we only hit them. We only slap them. But we're not like Americans who use the electric chair. And I said, well, there's no electricity here. **[Both laugh]**

And he said, don't worry we have generators.

[Both laugh]

I mean, we had to break it with humour. Otherwise we're not going to get out.

Ramita Navai: I remember you making him laugh. I remember you being so nervous all the way through.

Mais Al Bayaa: I mean, do you blame me?

Ramita Navai: No, I don't blame you. Yeah. And of course, I mean that's also, when you don't speak the language, you understood exactly everything he was saying.

And every now and again you would whisper to me, I thought very loudly, by the way.

[Both laugh]

I was always really worried when you started whispering to me. And there was always the word death in there, somewhere kill, death.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah but we survived it.

Ramita Navai: We did survive.

And then we drove out didn't we? We interviewed him, we drove out - there was that relief that we'd been driven out of the desert. And then we were shown the footage.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah, by the time that we were beating ourselves for not being able to film that our colleague literally says, oh, don't worry.

I have everything on my phone.

Ramita Navai: And I remember you and I just screamed. We just did a little dance didn't we? We just screamed and danced.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah. That was as we say our gold dust. So that was definitely,

Ramita Navai: Gold dust. the evidence that we needed.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah and we did it.

Ramita Navai: Mais, I'm going to ask you the one question I ask all of my guests. And if there's one bit of wisdom you could impart to our listeners from what you've learned from your experiences, what is it?

Mais Al Bayaa: Live your life, live your life. You never know when it's going to end and believe in that door that you draw on your wall. Every single one of us has that imaginary door, but just have the courage to knock it because you can. And no matter who tells you that you can't do it, you will do it.

That's what I would say to anyone who listens wherever they are. It doesn't have to be in a war zone. It could be in central London, but they feel as trapped as me being in the middle of Baghdad in 2003.

Ramita Navai: Mais, wise words. Always, always, always wise words with you. Thank you so much. I can't tell you what it's been like to hear you talk about your experiences and share them with me. Really thank you.

Mais Al Bayaa: Thank you for having me. Thank you very much.

Ramita Navai: You can find Mais's double Emmy winning documentary *Undercover with the Clerics* on BBC online and in the US PBS Frontline's website where you'll also find the documentaries we made together: *Iraq's assassins* and *Iraq Uncovered*.

Thank you for listening to this episode of **The Line of Fire**. If you'd like to follow me, my Twitter handle is at [@RamitaNavai](#).

And if you've enjoyed this episode, review, and subscribe. And tell your friends they can find us wherever they get their podcasts.

Until next time.

The Line of Fire is a podcast from *Aurra Studios*.

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