

Mais Al Bayaa Part One Transcript

Mais Al Bayaa: One night I remember very well. I was sleeping in my bed and then I see a light above my head.

Three bullets came just above my head.

And the curtain was just burned. The bullets were embedded in the wall in front of me.

And if I have gone straight up.

Ramita Navai: If you'd sat up?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah. Then the second bullet or the third bullet would be on my head.

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**.

My guest today is an Emmy and Robert F. Kennedy award-winning Iraqi journalist and documentary producer. Mais Al Bayaa has covered her home country and events in the region since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. In 2019, Mais was the recipient of the Rory Peck, Martin Adler prize for her significant contribution to news gathering. Mais, welcome.

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

Ramita Navai: Well Mais full disclosure for our listeners.

We have worked with each other. We've made two documentaries with each other, which means that you have also become one of my dearest friends.

Mais Al Bayaa: Thank you very much, Ramita.

Ramita Navai: And you Mais, are one of the people I've worked with who makes me laugh the most on the job, which is an absolute joy. I love working with you as you know, I guess you could say, you're my work wife.

Mais Al Bayaa: Thank you so much. If anything, I just learned from you.

Ramita Navai: But I'm going to take you way back, Mais, how did you end up in journalism?

Mais Al Bayaa: After 2003, just after the invasion, a friend of mine actually approached me and told me that one of the American networks in Baghdad needed a translator to help them only for a day.

And I agreed to do that and I was really bad to start with. It was horrible.

Ramita Navai: How were you bad?

Mais Al Bayaa: I didn't know any names of any ministers. I did not have a clue of where most of the provinces were in Iraq. So I was literally running like a headless chicken in the office.

And my boss, I just heard him shouting from his room saying, "Can you fire this idiot?"

[Both laugh]

"We can't have her working here, who brought her? When I come back, I don't want to see her face ever again."

And luckily the next day he actually had to start his holiday and my colleagues were kind enough to not pass the note to the new bureau chief.

And I continued. But my previous boss, like his words, really stuck in my head and I felt like I must do something about that. I must change. And I started really working hard to prove myself.

And after that I was just progressing. In the beginning, I agreed only to work in the office. I was too scared to even go in the streets. Because at that time, the hostility in the streets was becoming quite obvious. And I start hearing more and more incidents of killing local journalists. So I just said, I'm just going to accept to do the work inside the office.

And they told me, you know what, can you just call for one time with a camera man outside and just translate outside? And I said, okay, if it's just going to be one-off incident, I'm happy to do that. And I did it. But after that, I was like, why am I stuck in the office? Actually, this is what I really like to do.

Ramita Navai: So in a way you ended up becoming a journalist by accident because of historical events in your country?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes, but if I go back in time, actually, when I was a child, I remember myself standing in front of the mirror and holding my tooth brush and pretending that I am a correspondent for Reuters.

But I never thought like during or after that incident, I never thought that actually this is something I could achieve because of the life events at that time, because I knew that if I'm going to be a journalist under the Saddam regime, then there's nothing to cover.

So I kind of buried this thought and then after the invasion things changed.

Ramita Navai: So it was a secret ambition that could only be realised after the invasion?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes.

Ramita Navai: Do you think if the invasion hadn't happened, you would still be a journalist?

Mais Al Bayaa: No. No.

Ramita Navai: How would your life have panned out?

Mais Al Bayaa: I was doing my masters in Baghdad university in French literature. So my life was all about French literature, symphonies. I have a big library of books that I really enjoyed and I thought that I'm going to be a French teacher. That was my dream.

Because I had to play a safe dream that has nothing to do with politics because of my family background in Iraq.

So I had to build a very safe and comfortable life that is not going to put me in danger and put me again in a position where I have to confront Saddam Hussein again.

Ramita Navai: Tell me about your family background in Iraq.

Mais Al Bayaa: My dad was a communist and he's from a 0 family which made us in a lot of trouble.

Ramita Navai: Because Saddam Hussein was Sunni.

Mais Al Bayaa: Saddam Hussein was a Sunni.

Ramita Navai: Minority is in control.

Ramita Navai: **[Insert]** *The divide between Sunnis and Shias - the two main sects in Islam - happened after the death of their prophet Mohammad in 632 AD over a disagreement on who should be his successor.*

Over 85% of the world's Muslims are Sunnis. But in Iraq, the Shias are in the majority.

Mais Al Bayaa: And just before the Iraq Iranian war they actually started to deport most of the elite Shia families and freeze their assets.

My family were one of those people and we ended up being kicked out of the country when I was six months old.

Ramita Navai: What year was that?

Mais Al Bayaa: That was 1978. So, from that time we had no Iraqi citizenship. We had fake Lebanese passports and we were moving around with fake identity.

Ramita Navai: And why did you have fake Lebanese passports?

Mais Al Bayaa: Because I didn't have an Iraqi passport. You have no Iraqi citizenship, and we didn't want to apply for any asylum anywhere in Europe or anywhere else. So we had to create a new life.

Ramita Navai: So you were a stateless family. So Saddam kicked out your family in 1978?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes.

Ramita Navai: And then you were stateless. And why didn't your family want to seek asylum in Europe?

Mais Al Bayaa: My dad was a dreamer. He almost felt that one day, this nightmare was going to end. So he wanted to be close to home so he could run back home.

And he kept dreaming about it for most of his life. We stayed between Lebanon and Syria at that time because there was a war in Lebanon with Israel in the 80s. So we were going back and forth between Lebanon and Syria, but he wished that he'd be going back home as soon as he got his citizenship back, he's going back home. And indeed that happened. Sadly it happened just before the first Gulf war. And we got a pardon from Saddam Hussein giving us our citizenship back. We flew back to Baghdad. And that was one of the most stupid mistakes that we ever did in our life.

Ramita Navai: On what grounds did Saddam kick you and your father out of Iraq?

Mais Al Bayaa: At that time, Saddam said that most of these Shiite elite families are actually Iranian dissidents so they should go back to Iran. They are no longer Iraqis. And he was preparing for the war with Iran so he wanted to make sure that most of these families in Iraq should leave because once the Iranians start fighting with Iraq these people will be a threat.

Ramita Navai: *[Insert] In September 1980, Saddam Hussein launched an invasion on neighbouring Iran, a country which was still reeling from a revolution. Saddam feared Iran's new Shia establishment would embolden his country's disenfranchised Shia majority.*

He had imagined a quick, easy victory over a country in chaos. He was wrong. The Iran Iraq war lasted for eight years, ending in a stalemate, and leaving a million dead.

Mais Al Bayaa: Once he captured most of these elite Shia families who had a lot of money, he wanted to give that money to the Sunnis who were supporting him. So instead of, you know, getting money from somewhere else, we might as well use the money from his enemy to fund his allies. And that's exactly what he did.

Ramita Navai: And tell me about when your family returned to Iraq and why you think this was a stupid mistake, when was it exactly and why did Saddam Hussein pardon your father?

Mais Al Bayaa: Saddam pardoned my father, not only my father, I mean, he pardoned tens of thousands like my family, but at that time, the war had ended with Iran. So, he thought I might as well bring my enemies back home so I can keep an eye on them. And that's exactly what he did, which my family did not understand and did not think about it.

So, in a newspaper we saw that our name was in the pardoned list by Saddam Hussein. And we can now get our citizenship back. We went to the Iraqi embassy and got our passports for the first time and went back to Iraq. And, I remember I was having conversations with my family saying is that not the same person who actually stripped us of everything?

Why do you think that you should trust him now? And they said "Well, things change. It's time for us to go back home, to be for once Iraqis for real". And my father and my mother were desperate to go back to their big families and just be with them again. But sadly, it was not the case. We ended up going back and we were under severe surveillance by the Saddam regime.

So we were, again, trapped in the country. We couldn't leave. And even their promise to give us our assets back were fake. And we ended up again being stuck and most of our assets were frozen again. And, yeah, that was a massive mistake for my family.

Ramita Navai: And what happened during the first Gulf war? How did that affect you and your family?

Mais Al Bayaa: My family were quite relieved about the first Gulf war. Again, they felt that this was going to change their life. They had hoped that the Americans would do it right this time and they would get rid of Saddam.

Ramita Navai: So your family, like many Iraqis, wanted the Americans to help to oust Saddam?

Mais Al Bayaa: They wanted anyone to help to oust Saddam. They could even wish that the devil would come in and get rid of Saddam. It was that bad. So they were very desperate. When you're really desperate it doesn't matter who the face of your rescuer is, that is exactly what they wanted. And maybe it was just wishful thinking more than anything else.

Ramita Navai: [Insert] *In 1990 - two years after the end of the Iran-Iraq war - Saddam Hussein invaded another neighbour: this time oil-rich Kuwait.*

In response, the United States led a coalition of 35 nations in an offensive against Iraq. It was the largest military alliance since World War Two.

For 42 days and nights, Operation Desert Storm subjected Iraq to one of the most intensive air bombardments in military history. Saddam was easily defeated.

Ramita Navai: So how did they feel at the end of the first Gulf war?

Mais Al Bayaa: Livid. They thought that finally this war is going to change their lives.

All that happened is you see more destruction, you see more orphans, you see more loss.

The city is completely destroyed. You barely have electricity, you don't have water, you don't even have the basic things that you could wish for.

So it's just like, you know, it's almost like having a guest who thinks that he's just going to cheer you up at night. And all of what they do is just make a huge mess and leave and they don't even bother to tidy up. So, imagine the frustration of millions of people at that time. That's exactly what happened.

I lived through the first Gulf war and it was different. I've seen death every single day. As soon as I hear the sirens I know that someone is going to die.

So I had that habit of having tears running down my cheeks as soon as I heard the sirens.

But I thought like from the first Gulf War that when I survived it there's nothing going to be worse than that. [But actually the second Gulf war was hell.

Ramita Navai: [Insert] *The 2003 US invasion of Iraq was based on a lie - that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.*

Once the Americans, with the help of the Brits and other allies, had toppled Saddam's government, they stayed on to help nation building - with catastrophic

results. When the Iraqi army was disbanded, hundreds of thousands of Sunni men lost their jobs overnight, and as the long-persecuted Shia majority rose to power, sectarian divisions exploded. So followed insurgencies and war, empowering terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS. The US finally withdrew after eight years. Nearly half a million Iraqis were killed by the war and its side effects.

Ramita Navai: And so what was it like in 2003 when the Americans invaded?

Mais Al Bayaa: Every single night, as soon as it's like 7 PM, the sirens go all around the city and then everyone goes home and runs home, turning off the lights. And then the bombing starts. All night. What happens to us is that as soon as we hear the sirens, me and my dad, we go on the roof of our house and keep watching. It was like Hollywood. It's, you know, one bombing after the other and you don't even hear screams. You hear nothing. And Saddam at that time had this crazy idea of burning tyres all around the city.

So what happens is that your day and night become the same. You just see red, red clouds, kind of really dark maroon red. And if you don't see or watch you wouldn't even know what time it is. If it's morning or night. So imagine with that scene and with the sounds and you hearing the sirens and you don't see anyone in the streets, no one exists. I don't know if that is not hell because for me I felt like can I get out of this? Is that even possible? And I felt trapped.

Ramita Navai: Were you working as a journalist at this point?

Mais Al Bayaa: No, no.

At that time I was just finishing my master's at Baghdad university. I was doing my master's in French literature. So I was just graduating from my university and my master thesis was on French symphonies.

So I had a completely different dream at that time. And actually that war made me hate music so badly. I couldn't listen to any symphony after that invasion because I always associated in my head with the sound of bombing now.

Ramita Navai: So then tell me what it was like when you're living through this war and you started working as a journalist. Did it make it easier to cope with what was happening around you?

Mais Al Bayaa: No, it did not make it easier to cope because I started to learn more of what's happening and how much brutality was going around me. It's a different thing when you see from the roof of your house a bombing and when you actually work as a journalist and go in the field and meet these families and ask them questions. So it's completely different. There's no comparison between those two.

Ramita Navai: What's it like reporting from your own country? You lived and worked as a journalist in Iraq from 2003 to 2006. So in those three years you were living the

war and you were reporting the war. Is it different from reporting from other countries?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes, it's different. Because in Iraq, most of the time, you know, it's almost like people because they, people marry from each other's families and you know, it's not a city that is open to the world. So most of the time, you're going to end up bumping into a family, family member or could be a friend or could be a neighbour or a friend of a neighbour.

And I was always anxious if I was ever going to have to report something on my own family and that anxiety is never gone whenever I am reporting on something in Iraq.

Ramita Navai: Does that mean it's harder to be detached? Is it harder to be unbiased in a way?

Mais Al Bayaa: It is harder. Definitely. It is harder. You have a common thing with these people. They know you, they speak the same language, the same accent that I speak at home, they like the same food that I like. It's just home. I think it's really difficult actually.

Ramita Navai: Because there's such a strong emotional attachment?

Mais Al Bayaa: There is a very strong emotional attachment. And as I said, there is always fear of having a family to report on a family matter.

Ramita Navai: So you're living in fear that the war is creeping towards you. You're living in fear that it's going to one day touch you and your family. Did it get close?

Mais Al Bayaa: So what happened is that after the invasion, I felt like the circle of death was getting smaller and smaller.

And the incidents I used to hear about before that it would be someone in a far city from us has been kidnapped or killed. That circle starts to shrink and it starts to become closer to our family. And that happened actually in 2007 my father was kidnapped by the Shia militia. And they kidnapped him actually by mistake because he was driving in a Sunni neighbourhood and then they stopped him and dragged him out of his car.

And they were all of that time they were interrogating him, asking him whether he's Shia or Sunni and luckily he was kidnapped by a Shia militia and is Shia. So when they knew that he's from the same sector they actually let him go and they apologised to him.

And, these incidents were frequently happening. Actually our neighbour next door as well, he was assassinated at his doorstep, which is next to us. And his wife just delivered a baby. And sadly, that baby is growing up an orphan. And I know I was

just really scared that this could be me. I should, I might see my father being killed at our doorstep or could be the other way around.

Ramita Navai: How long was your father held for?

Mais Al Bayaa: He was held for a couple of hours, but it was just luck that he was not - at that time because there were Al-Qaeda about at that time as well as the Shia militia.

And both were kidnapping the other sector. So thank God at that time, it was a Shia militia kidnapping my dad. If it was Al-Qaeda, my dad would be gone.

Ramita Navai: How did your family cope with that? How did your father cope with what happened him?

Mais Al Bayaa: Denial. They have to live with denial that this is just a mistake. This is not going to happen again. And we will survive. But this is how you live when you are in a war zone, you live in denial.

I was thinking of myself like a hero in a film. That I can't die. When I'm dead, this film is going to be over, and this is going to be a really bad film if it's going to be over like that. So I was having that dream that this is just a film. I can't die. I won't die. But some people around me sadly will. And they did.

Ramita Navai: And tell me about the people you lost along the way.

Mais Al Bayaa: There's one guy actually I can't erase him from my mind. I was working in Alhambra hotel. The TV station channel I was working with, they were based on Alhambra hotel in Baghdad, in central Baghdad. And this guy was a friend of mine that I formed a friendship, just by meeting him in the lobby of the hotel.

And he was a journalist and he was working for another network and he had just got married and his wife had twins and I met him in the lobby and he said to me, "Mais I think I'm going to die." And I kept saying, "What? Why do you think like that? I mean, there's nothing." And he said, "No, I have that feeling that I'm going to die. So I'm just going to collect my salary at the end of this month. And I'm going to take the ferry to Dubai, with my wife and children, and I'm just going to leave." And I said, "Don't be silly. This is nothing, I know we hear a lot of his stories about what's happening around, but it's not going to happen to us."

I mean, I was trying to convince him that he's probably another hero like my film. And he said, "I don't know. I really don't feel good about it." Two days later while I was sitting in my office, I was translating the headlines of the news. I see his picture on TV.

[Mais cries]

He was beheaded.

[Mais cries]

I'm sorry.

It's okay. Go on.

Ramita Navai: I mean what astounds me about you is that you were living it, you weren't like our colleagues who were visitors. It was your country and you were living through the war and yet you continued and you continue now, your father was kidnapped by Shia militias. You and I have spent many years investigating the Shia militias. It's your absolute bravery and determination. What was it in you that, you know, you're clearly still so affected by the execution of your friend. What was it in you, do you think that drove you on?

Mais Al Bayaa: I mean, when I left Iraq and I left Iraq in 2006, when I left Iraq, I wanted to shut the door. I wanted to say never again. I'm going to have a simple life in London. I'm going to live my life for once without hearing any sirens, being able to walk with high heels, like everybody else, you know? My main dilemma would be where would I go on the weekend?

And how can I spend my Saturday night? But I couldn't live with that. I was feeling guilty. I was feeling guilty for all of the people I left behind and I wanted to do something. And I knew I cannot bring all of these people back. But I have to do something.

Ramita Navai: Did your friend's death and hearing about it in that way, did it change anything for you?

Mais Al Bayaa: It changed a lot. It changed a lot. It just made me feel that this is no longer a movie. This is real. And you have one shot. So you have to live your life as if you were going to die tomorrow.

That's what really changed in me.

Ramita Navai: Did it change your work?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes. It made me angrier. It made me feel that I have to speak up even more, despite that I have a lot of fear, but I have to overcome it. I learned to feel comfortable in being uncomfortable. This is what I learned through all of the wars I have gone through, through everything I have seen. I learned to feel my comfort zone and whenever I step out of it I feel myself. And this is how I break my fear by just stepping out of my comfort zone and being comfortable inside the new norm.

This is how I deal with it now.

Ramita Navai: And did this execution of your friend make you more scared?

Mais Al Bayaa: At that time, yes. I mean, I was 26 when it happened and that was not even the main incident that changed my life, but it was one of too many incidents that actually changed my life.

Ramita Navai: Were you ever able Mais to go home after a day's work and leave the wars behind? And leave the war behind? Leave the stories behind?

Mais Al Bayaa: Every single day I was leaving work I was even more scared because I was bringing trouble to my home. The journey from my office to home was even worse than the actual day of work.

Ramita Navai: In what way?

Mais Al Bayaa: At that time there were a lot of local journalists who'd been followed and killed. So my driver was driving me home and we all had to look back and forth behind us to see if we were monitored. And, the journey usually takes about 20 minutes to my home but actually it was taking about more than an hour.

Because I have to manoeuvre and take different routes in order to go back home. And I was feeling really guilty that if I'm going to ever endanger my family for the things I am doing right now. I couldn't leave anything behind.

It's your lifestyle. If you're not going to talk about work, you're going to talk about the neighbour who just got shot, you're going to talk about your cousin who just disappeared, you're going to talk about your father who just got kidnapped. So no, there was no weekend. There's nothing called a weekend. You never let your hair down. You never forget about where you are and what you're doing.

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: And how was it then walking into the office and working with your colleagues who weren't Iraqis and weren't living in Iraq?

Mais Al Bayaa: We had kind of two separate lives. So we had the Iraqi colleagues I was working with, which we promised each other that we would never invite each other to each other's house. So they wouldn't know where we live.

Ramita Navai: Why?

Mais Al Bayaa: Just in case anyone got caught. And if they were ever tortured, they will genuinely not know where we are.

Ramita Navai: In case one of your colleagues got kidnapped because Iraqi journalists then were targeted and killed at an alarming rate and they were being kidnapped.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes. At that time there were a lot of Iraqi journalists who had been kidnapped and beheaded.

So we decided between us as colleagues that we will never tell each other's location. So then if anyone gets captured they would not tell any militia or the guide at that time where we are. And then we will be safe.

And we also, we used to laugh and discuss about what was going to happen to us. And each one of us would have a different way of killing themselves if they were ever caught by Al-Qaeda that time.

Ramita Navai: Was it a joke or was there any seriousness in it?

Mais Al Bayaa: No, it wasn't a joke. No, we don't joke like these things. It's in a way it's always, you know, a black humour joke.

That is actually because we can't be very serious about it but we know that this is going to happen if one of us gets caught.

Ramita Navai: That you had planned your suicide?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes. We were planning our own suicide. If we ever get caught by any militia.

Because we have seen as journalists we have seen first-hand on videos circulating at that time how these militia would actually deal with journalists in Iraq.

So we would prefer to actually kill ourselves than actually end up being tortured by them.

Ramita Navai: And how had you decided you would do it?

Mais Al Bayaa: I had a driver who was always with me and he was sometimes carrying a gun. So I always say, “Just shoot me in the head. I want to make sure that I will be completely gone. I don't want you to shoot me anywhere that I could actually still be alive. So I'd rather just be gone straight away”.

But, we kept saying to each other, “Listen if one of us gets caught the other will shoot the other in the head”.

Ramita Navai: And so you couldn't get close to your fellow Iraqi journalists. What about the Western journalists you're working with?

Mais Al Bayaa: I mean, the Western journalists, they were, most of the time stuck in the compound. They barely left. So you could see some actually on their desks doing online dating, the others were doing some shopping and booking their holidays. Some others were actually interested in us and asking us questions about our life and how does it feel to be in the field?

So there were kind of different attitudes towards us.

Ramita Navai: So in a way, I guess they were closeted. Whereas you didn't have an option. You had to go out. You had to go home in the middle of this war.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes. I mean, that is, I think that was where our frustration was happening. You know, you see a foreign journalist coming for two or three weeks and then after that they are just planning for their holiday and their retreat to go back home and to go back to normality. And then when we ask them, like, why do you have to do this in three weeks? And they say, because we are under a lot of stress, so we want to make sure that our mental wellbeing will always be intact. And I used to laugh. I say, I mean, I've no idea why you would be actually under stress while you've not even going on the street and doing anything like, getting your hands dirty. Anyway, most of the time I was actually doing that job.

Ramita Navai: And what about your mental well-being when this was going on? Did you have access to therapists? Were the therapists there?

Mais Al Bayaa: Nothing. Nothing. Okay. I'll tell you something. It probably was a joke. I mean, when my friend told me about it, we literally acted as if it was a joke. So my friend went to a therapist and told him I need a doctor. And he said, like a GP.

Ramita Navai: In Iraq? An Iraqi GP?

Mais Al Bayaa: In Iraq. An Iraqi GP. And he said to him, “Doctor, I really think I am depressed.”

And the doctor laughed and said, “And what do you think I'm not?” [Mais laughs] “Why are you here? Well, of course you're depressed. You're in Iraq. What do you expect?” And he said, “What am I going to do?” And he said “Just go home, drink

some yoghurt, and go to bed. You'll be fine tomorrow." This is how we were dealing with trauma.

Ramita Navai: There was no escaping war?

Mais Al Bayaa: No. You're trapped. I was feeling like a mouse inside a cage.

Ramita Navai: Was leaving Iraq a possibility? By this point you were working with Western media organisations.

Mais Al Bayaa: No.

Ramita Navai: Why not?

Mais Al Bayaa: No country would accept you. At that time, most of the borders were shut because everyone was scared of us as if we were a virus. So there was nowhere to go.

But I promised myself, this is not going to be the way I'm going to end. As I said, it was a film for me.

Ramita Navai: Was that a coping mechanism?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah.

You know, when there's no escape, you have to almost draw an imaginary door on a wall and pretend that one day this door is going to open.

And so you have to create your own door. You have to make your own destiny.

Ramita Navai: And what do you think now looking back at how you were coping?

Mais Al Bayaa: I have no idea how I did it. I think I keep thinking that it was impossible to actually survive every single thing that I have gone through at that time. But that is how you cope in war zones.

Ramita Navai: I mean, it's just all the more extraordinary because I know you so well Mais. And I know that you are a naturally anxious person which makes it even braver.

I mean, you are one of the bravest people I know.

Mais Al Bayaa: Thank you.

Ramita Navai: I remember you telling me when I first met you and we were in Iraq together, we were driving along the airport road which was then, when the invasion happened and in the years after the invasion, it was the most dangerous road in the country?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah. Called the road of death.

Ramita Navai: And you live just off the road of death. You lived on it.

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah.

Ramita Navai: You lived on the road of death. And I remember you telling me stories about everyday life waking up in the morning.

Mais Al Bayaa: I was living just off that road and some nights in the middle of the night you literally wake up by a bullet above your head. I mean, one night I remember very well. I was sleeping in my bed and then I see a light above my head and I just crawl from my bed and I jump and I go to my parents and I say, I don't know what that light was. There was something in my room. And they were like, there's not even electricity. What are you talking about? And I said, I don't know. I've seen a light above my head and they take the torch and they actually go to my room and they see that the curtain was burning. Three bullets had come just above my head.

And the curtain was just burned and just the bullets were embedded in the wall in front of me. And if I have gone straight up...

Ramita Navai: If you'd sat up?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yeah. Then the second bullet or the third bullet would be in my head. So imagine it's like, you can't even sleep in your own room. There's no safe place ever.

Ramita Navai: Did you have to sleep in that bed again?

Mais Al Bayaa: Yes.

I had to go back to the same bed like nothing happened, where can I go?

Ramita Navai: Did you sleep?

Mais Al Bayaa: No. Which is why I have anxieties because I have severe insomnia. Because the night is always reminding me of war. And that is when the sirens happen. And that is when the bombing starts and that's when the shooting happens.

So I become alert. And I just expect that something's going to happen.

Ramita Navai: We will continue Mais's story on the next episode of ***The Line of Fire***; where we'll hear how she survived a suicide bombing, ended up on a hit list, and how she finally escaped Iraq.

In the meantime, you can find Mais's double Emmy award-winning documentary *Undercover with the Clerics* on BBC online, and for US listeners, it's on PBS Frontline's website. Where you can 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](https://twitter.com/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*.

It was presented by me, Ramita Navai, and edited and produced by Chris Scott. Our executive producers are Matt Raz and Richard Osman.