

Testimony of
Sami**

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"The Plight of Iraqi Refugees"
Before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary
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Thank you Chairman Leahy, Ranking Member Spector, Senator Kennedy, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee for providing me the opportunity to testify and share my experiences with you as a former Iraqi translator assisting Coalition and U.S. forces in Iraq. I am privileged and honored to do so.

In order to protect my identity, and because of concerns for the safety of my family back home in Iraq, I am testifying here today under the pseudonym of Sami Al-Obiedy.

I. BACKGROUND

I am a 27 year old Sunni, Arab and was born and raised in Mosul, Iraq. My parents and siblings and their children still reside in Mosul. I attended primary and secondary school in Mosul, and in 2000, I began my college studies at the University of Mosul. I enrolled in the English Department of the College of Arts, Department of Translation. I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in June 2005.

II. BA'ATH PARTY IN IRAQ

The Ba'ath party was the ruling party of Iraq until June 2003. Under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, the Ba'ath party inflicted terror and intimidation on the citizens of Iraq. People were raped, murdered, tortured, imprisoned and intimidated for holding beliefs that were inconsistent with the beliefs of the party.

In Mosul, more than half of the population of approximately 1.7 million consisted of members of the Ba'ath party.

Neither I nor my family has ever been members of the Ba'ath party. In fact, we have always denounced the Ba'ath party because of the intolerance and brutality of some of its members. However, because of the real danger of reprisal, we could not express our political views of the Ba'ath party publicly nor to others whom we knew to be Ba'athists. Nonetheless, as Iraqi citizens living in Mosul, we were repeatedly pressured by local officials to join the Ba'ath party and subjected to harsh criticism and ridicule and denied substantial employment and educational opportunities when our family refused to do so.

III. MYROLE AS TRANSLATOR TO U.S. AND COALITION FORCES AND THE RISKS OF HARM AND DANGER

In April 2003, shortly after U.S. troops arrived in Mosul, I volunteered to work as an Iraqi translator. I welcomed the opportunity to help U.S. and Coalition Forces not only because I was majoring in English translation, but because I believed that U.S. and Coalition Forces had come to liberate Iraq from years of tyranny and oppression under Sadaam's regime. I continued to work as an Iraqi translator until November 2004. Throughout this entire time, I earned the respect and trust of many U.S. servicemen who highly recommended me for continued service.

In my role as a translator, I assisted Coalition Forces, particularly U.S. troops, in all aspects of their missions. Specifically, I provided support to the Civil Affairs and Public Affairs operations in Mosul. I was primarily responsible for translating conversations, coordinating meetings, and building working relationships between local Iraqi government officials, business, civic and religious leaders and U.S. and Coalition Forces, which were involved in securing, stabilizing, and reconstructing Iraq.

In reality, I tried to do whatever was asked of me. This included dangerous tasks, such as searching for weapons and gathering intelligence in very hostile places. I assisted U.S. forces with the planning and implementation of local projects, or with negotiations involving local vendors and contractors. I went to the local markets and shops to make personal purchases for U.S. soldiers. I also accompanied U.S. soldiers on hundreds of convoys through hostile territory. Often, the military vehicles in which we traveled were targeted by anti-Iraqi insurgents and terrorists, and we were constantly in danger of being killed by road-side bombs, rocket-propelled grenades, ambush and/or small-arms sniper fire. On one occasion, the vehicle in which I was traveling crashed into a ditch after coming under heavy enemy fire.

Additionally, I assisted U.S. and Coalition Forces as they attempted to re-establish communications between Northern Iraq and Baghdad. We had to continually employ Iraqis to repair the telephone lines that were repeatedly destroyed by the terrorists. I went into the local communities to find Iraqi suppliers and contractors who would assist U.S. troops in establishing communications and setting up billboards expressing democratic ideals; I served as a direct point of contact for the Iraqi suppliers because they were fearful to be seen with U.S. troops. For my efforts in helping the U.S. military to rebuild communications infrastructure, I received a Certificate of Appreciation.

During the time I served as a translator for Coalition Forces, I feared for my life and honestly believed I would be killed. As I explain in more detail below, terrorists view Iraqi citizens who help U.S. and Coalition Forces as traitors and infidels and would not hesitate and indeed would relish the opportunity to torture and murder anyone who dared to help the Americans.

A. THREATS AT MOSUL UNIVERSITY

After I began to work as a translator, in late October 2003, I arranged with one of the Deans of Mosul University to allow U.S. Servicemen to visit the school to speak with my classmates. When the Dean with whom I had made such arrangements became unavailable due to an emergency, I did not cancel the visit. Instead, I decided to personally escort a U.S. soldier with

whom I had worked and introduce him to other students at the University. I wanted to give my classmates the opportunity to speak with him, not as a soldier but as a person, and to share political and cultural views.

When the students saw the U.S. soldier, however, many of them became enraged. These classmates, many of which were former members of the Ba'ath party, were upset at having a U.S. soldier at the school. I was assaulted and threatened with violence. After the incident, the Dean with whom I had discussed the U.S. soldier's visit turned on me and threatened to expel me from the University if continued to help U.S. Forces.

Additionally, I was constantly threatened with violence by my fellow classmates and called a "traitor" on a daily basis. No one from the administration did anything to prevent the threats and harassment. The situation at the University became so bad, and the threats of violence so vicious, that I had no choice but to take a leave of absence from school, one year short of obtaining my degree. In 2005, I returned to the University, and was able to obtain my degree. But even after I returned, I attended classes sporadically, and felt compelled to carry a concealed handgun to protect myself from constant death threats.

B. DANGERS FACED AS AN IRAQI TRANSLATOR

I often volunteered to accompany U.S. and Coalition Forces on civil affairs missions - which usually involved traveling into Iraqi neighborhoods and villages to assess the needs of the local community. During these missions, my affiliation and assistance to U.S. forces was genuine and plain for all to see. This was particularly dangerous because some of these people were actually covertly working with anti-Iraqi insurgents and terrorists to undermine our efforts. Some of these people included former Ba'ath party members and insurgent sympathizers who held positions of authority in the local Iraqi police force. For instance, I translated many discussions between U.S. Forces and Mosul's Police Chief, General Mohammed Kheiri Barhawi, who was eventually arrested in November 2004 for working with terrorists. There is no question that during the time that Barhawi remained Mosul's Chief of Police, my life was in jeopardy.

Going to work on the U.S. base in Mosul was very dangerous to Iraqi citizens. From time to time, we were subjected to sniper fire and missile attacks. Some people were killed just waiting to clear security to enter the Base for work. Terrorists also had their own intelligence gathering abilities, using computers, cameras and human lookouts, to identify Iraqis reporting to work. Iraqis working with U.S. and Coalition Forces were routinely followed to and from work. In order to avoid detection, I took various means of transportation to get to work. It was common for me to drive my car to one location and then take several cabs to get to the U.S. Base. Safety was always a concern. On one occasion, after leaving the U.S. Base, I was pursued by a car and became involved in a high speed chase. I escaped only after I crashed my own car and several local citizens came to my aid.

The risk of harm was very real to Iraqis helping U.S. Forces. Many Iraqis were purposely killed in public market squares in front of hundreds of people in broad daylight as cruel examples of what could happen to local Iraqis who assisted U.S. and Coalition Forces. The killings were gruesome. Iraqi citizens, including translators, have been shot in the head or beheaded, but only after terrorists forced these people

to "confess" that they were spies and agents of the United States. These killings were often video-taped and played on radical Islamic web sites or sold as CDs in the local Iraqi markets and throughout the Middle East. I personally have seen many of these types of CDs titled "US agents" or "Traitors" in Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, since I have been in the United States, I have seen video clips on the Internet (www.ogrish.com) in which terrorists kill and torture Iraqi translators.

I have worked closely with some of the Iraqi people that have been murdered by terrorists. I mention below just a few of the brave men and women who lost their lives because of their commitment to helping U.S. and Coalition Forces achieve a free and democratic Iraq.

(1) The Governor of the local province Osama Kashmoula was gunned down in the line of duty. In September 2004, Kashmoula was en route to a meeting in Baghdad when his convoy was attacked by insurgents. The Iraqi police under the command of Chief Barhawi had placed a towel over the

Governor's window - which they said was to shield him from the sun. In fact, the towel marked the spot to aim the bullets fired by insurgents which killed Kashmoula. Kashmoula spent nine years of his life in prison under Sadaam's regime. His brother was beaten to death in front of Kashmoula while Kashmoula was in his cell. Kashmoula was a Sunni Arab and a Professor of Agriculture at the University of Mosul. He agreed to become Governor and worked for democracy and for that reason he was assassinated.

(2) The head of the local anti-corruption unit, Waleed Kashmoula, was making substantial progress in anticorruption investigations and was killed when a bomb was detonated in his office compound.

(3) "Samir" the lead interpreter for the Task Force Public Affairs office who worked to help develop a free and independent press in the Mosul region, was executed by several gunmen on a crowded street in broad daylight on his way to work. Samir would typically take five taxis a day and change clothes en route. In 2004, he was taken hostage by insurgents. He attempted to escape from his captors because he knew better than anyone from his translation of video and other literature the horrible fate that Iraqis who worked for Coalition Forces faced. He broke free at a crowded intersection and ran into an open market. The terrorists chased him down and shot in the back in a crowded market. After he had fallen, he cried for help but no one came. One of the terrorists then calmly approached Samir, stood over him, and shot him point blank in the face. The terrorist walked away after killing Samir.

(4) Former Iraqi Brigadier murdered because of his role in facilitating the construction of 50 schools in the region.

(5) A female law professor murdered for teaching progressive ideals at the local university.

(6) Sanabil- another Iraqi interpreter - was murdered when one morning on her way to work in a taxi terrorists drove up behind the taxi and opened fire through the back end of the vehicle striking her repeatedly.

I too have been specifically targeted for death. My name, along with those of other translators, was listed on the doors of several Mosques calling for my death. Friends of mine from my Mosque saw my name on the list and they turned on me. They saw me as a "traitor." I could no longer attend prayer services. Because of the calls to kill me as a traitor and infidel, I feared that if I attended services certain Islamic radicals would carry out the death threat.

Additionally, I became an outcast in my own Mosul neighborhood. Because of my service, some individuals I have known all my life branded me a "traitor" and made death threats against me. In the Spring and Summer of 2004, the security situation worsened in Mosul. As the state of security deteriorated, translators were heavily targeted. We heard of several translators and other officials who were targeted and killed during this time. I was one of the last translators to resign my position. I did so reluctantly and primarily because I feared terrorists would hurt or kill members of my family, including my younger brother to whom I felt a responsibility to protect. But I continued to stay in touch with many U.S. Soldiers who became my friends at the Base in Mosul, and made a point to thank: them and wish them well when their tour of duty was complete and they were scheduled to return to the United States.

I had been encouraged by many U.S. soldiers, whom I considered to be close friends to leave Iraq because of the increasing risks and dangers. I heeded their sound advice. In the Fall of 2004, I decided to go to Syria for my safety and stayed with Iraqi friends who had also worked with U.S. troops in Iraq and had fled to Syria because of the violence directed against them. One of them, Omar, had a grenade thrown at his home and was shot at several times. Fortunately, he was not injured. I felt that I was in the same danger, and would have left Iraq sooner but for the fact that I still had one more semester of school to complete my degree.

After a short stay in Syria, I went to Egypt in December 2004 to visit family. Even though I was afraid to return to Iraq, I was determined to complete my college studies.

I returned to Iraq in February 2005. When I arrived in Mosul, I completed my exams. I then started the second semester of my senior year. Since I still faced much danger, I was not able to go to school every day. Instead, I went to school approximately once a week and at different times. At the beginning of the second semester, I learned that a friend and Iraqi translator, Alaa, was shot numerous times and killed. Fearing for my own life, I felt the need to again carry a pistol and took different means of transportation using different routes to school. In short, I was constantly looking over my shoulder wondering not if but when I would be attacked.

Right after I completed my studies in June of 2005, I went to Egypt again, but this time to apply for a Visa to come to the United States. I told no one, not even my parents. I went to U.S. Embassy in Egypt to apply for a Visa because if anyone found out I was attempting to travel to the United States, my family would be targeted. Many of my friends in U.S. military advised me to leave Iraq and promised that they would help me. I stayed in Egypt from the end of June until September 25, 2005. Shortly after obtaining my Visa from the U.S. Embassy in Egypt, I decided to return to Iraq one last time to settle some debts, write my last will and testament, and observe the holy month of Ramadan.

I returned home and stayed for over a month. For most of this time, I did not leave my house unless it was absolutely necessary and even then never unaccompanied or unarmed. I decided that I would leave Iraq on November 9, 2005. As it turns out, I almost never made it.

C. CAR BOMBING

On November 7, 2005, I was seriously injured in a car bombing. A friend, my younger brother and I were in a car traveling through a Mosul neighborhood when a suicide bomber in a car directly behind us blew himself up. It appeared that we were the intended target of the bombing since the car directly ahead of us dramatically slowed down at the same time the suicide bomber accelerated his car and detonated the bomb inside. Sitting in the passenger seat, I was hit by shrapnel in the face, bloodied and dazed, and my eyebrows singed off. I am fortunate to be alive.

IV. THE GRANT OF POLITICAL ASYLUM AND SPECIAL IMMIGRANT STATUS

I fled Iraq. When I arrived in the United States in November 2005, my immigration status was one of a temporary visitor on a B1/B2 visa. Fearing that I would one day have to return to Iraq and face the same dangers that I had fled, upon my arrival in the United States I began seeking advice for the process of obtaining asylum. In March 2006, I learned of a training scheduled to be held at the law firm of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, LLP in Philadelphia for lawyers who had an interest in representing individuals who sought the protections provided by a grant of asylum in the United States. I attended this training session and eventually contacted attorneys at Morgan Lewis who agreed to represent me on a pro bono basis.

My attorneys from Morgan Lewis, including Yordanos Teferi, Michael Labovitz, Dino Privitera, Brian Watson and John Gorman, subsequently prepared and filed my application for asylum. They also prepared and filed an application for special immigrant status under a newly enacted law that provided protective status to those individuals who served as translators for American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. In June 2006, I learned that I had been granted special immigrant status. I have since been advised that I was the first applicant ever to be granted this status under the new law.

On November 21, 2006, I was required to appear before an immigration officer to be interviewed for my asylum application which remained pending. Two weeks after my interview, I was notified that my application for asylum was being recommended for approval.

As a result of the granting of my two applications, today I live free from the fear of persecution and threats to my life that I faced on a daily basis in Iraq.

During the application process, many of the people in the U.S. military with whom I worked closely, and who were in the best position to know about the dangers faced by Iraqi interpreters, agreed that I could not return without risking my life and provided letters of support on my behalf. I am grateful to these brave soldiers who took the time and effort to write on my behalf, and am humbled and honored by their friendship and desire to see me live in freedom and security in the United States. Included among the many letters of support was one from General Carter Ham, the Senior Commander for all U.S. and Coalition Forces in Northern Iraq from January 2004 through February 2005.

Indeed, during the time that I have been in the United States, I have lived with U.S. soldiers and their families, who have not only opened their homes to me but their hearts as well.

V. CONCLUSION

I love Iraq. But I knew that I could not return home. Iraqi translators who have aided the United States are seen by terrorists as traitors to Iraq. If I were to return to Mosul, I am confident that I would be killed by anti-Iraqi insurgents and terrorists who oppose with every fiber in their bodies the creation of a democratic and free Iraq, and any Iraqi who has ever worked with Coalition Forces to achieve that dream.

The threat of violence to Iraqis helping U.S. forces continues to this very day. I am saddened to read on almost a daily basis news reports of Iraqis who are killed because of their assistance to U.S. Forces. As was widely reported in the media, for example, last year freelance reporter Jill Carroll was kidnapped and her Iraqi translator was killed.

I agreed to help the Americans. I have absolutely no regrets. If I had to do everything over again, I would not change a thing. I am proud to have served as a translator for U.S. Forces. I see America as a symbol of freedom and democracy, and I was and am willing to die to help bring those same principles and values to my country. I wanted to be the Iraqi face and voice through which America could communicate its mission of hope and otherwise bridge the language, religious and cultural gap that exists between our people. It was my privilege and honor.

Simply stated, without Iraqi translators willing to risk their lives to help U.S. and Coalition Forces, it would not have been, or continue to be possible, for U.S. and Coalition Forces to assuage concerns, dispel fears and misconceptions, share common experiences, reinforce positives, build partnerships, or foster mutual trust and respect. As it did with me, the road to a free and democratic Iraq begins first and foremost in the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. Without the ability to communicate with the Iraqi people in their own language, democracy and freedom will be at risk. Terrorists understand this concept all too well, and that is why they have, and will continue to, specifically target Iraqi translators and kill those who have dared to give freedom and democracy a voice in Iraq.