

VIEWPOINTS



Photo by Michael Jordan

Kurdish flag snaps in the breeze over a Peshmerga outpost in northern Iraq.

HEARTBREAK IN IRAQ:

Journalist who visited country 4 years ago grieves

BY MICHAEL JORDAN

The world has been horrified by recent atrocities committed by Islamic extremists in northern Iraq. The events taking place there hit especially close to home for me because I met many of the terrorists' victims in person four years ago.

As a free-lance reporter traveling with Fort Stewart-based 3rd Infantry Division soldiers in Iraq in 2010, I spent two weeks in the city of Mosul and in a village close to the Iraq-Syria border.



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My group flew via Army helicopter into a remote outpost in the midst of the northwestern Iraqi desert, where 3rd ID soldiers served alongside allied Kurdish and Iraqi Army troops. Third ID commanding general Tony Cucolo had organized the three disparate forces into patrols he called

the "Golden Lions," named for the famous lions guarding the gates of ancient Baghdad. I joined a Golden Lions foot patrol that marched into a nearby village. There, we walked through a busy, colorful market, visited a local newspaper editor, and checked in with local leaders.

But the most fascinating encounter was an unexpected stop in a Kurdish soldiers' home. We sat on embroidered cushions on the floor, using our hands to scoop chicken and vegetables from large trays onto pieces of fresh-baked flatbread.

Presiding over the gathering was the Kurdish soldiers' father, a well-built man in his 60s who proudly showed us a portrait of himself serving in Saddam's army during the Iran-Iraq war.

In the black-and-white photo, sporting the thick Saddam-style moustache he still wore, the man looked much like the dictator himself. Kurds, he explained, served as bodyguards because of their fearsome reputation.

The old soldiers' kind eyes belied his stern visage, and those eyes twinkled as he bounced his toddler grandson in his lap.

An Easter vigil

The Kurds in the area were members of a small religious group known as the Yazidis — a faith group, reviled as "devil worshippers" by many of their Muslim neighbors, which blend elements of various established religions with folk traditions. Though technically part of a democratic Iraq, the Yazidi Kurds identified closely with the nominally independent nation of Kurdistan, and the Kurdish red, white, and green banner, with a yellow star in the center, fluttered from every rooftop in the town.

The flags flew over a prosperous, vibrant place that I can only assume, due to its location in the midst of the ISIS stronghold, is now the scene of violence, suffering, and devastation.

Later, my group of sol-



Photo by Michael Jordan

Kurdish Peshmerga soldier with emblem of the "Golden Lions" on his sleeve.

diers returned to the large American base in nearby Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, which has recently fallen under the control of ISIS fighters. At the time of my visit, Mosul was an ethnically divided, predominantly Muslim city where American and Iraqi soldiers struggled to maintain order. It was here that I learned of the region's historic Christian community.

Within the confines of the base was St. Elijah's Monastery, a stone complex dating to at least the late 6th century, and Iraq's oldest monastery. It was the center of the early Christian church in the area, until the monks who lived there were killed by a Persian conqueror in the mid-1700s. The protection of American troops allowed archaeologists to work on the abandoned historic site.

On Saturday, April 3, 2010, my friend Father Patrick Van Durme, at the time Chaplain of the "Battle Kings" of the 1/9 Field Artillery, presided over a candlelight Easter vigil in the

ancient monastery, breathing life into its silent, cold stones. Standing in the midst of hundreds of American soldiers and base contractors, I saw a host of faces illuminated by the flickering candlelight. A shiver went down my spine as I thought of the men who gave their lives for their faith almost five centuries earlier on the very spot where we worshipped.

I soon learned that the Christian faith in Iraq did not die with the monks of St. Elijah's.

While visiting a local television station in the Iraqi city of Kirkuk, I met a station employee who wore a gold cross around his neck. When I asked him about the jewelry, the man replied, in English, that he was part of a large Christian community in the area — a community which includes believers across the borders in Turkey and Iran as well as in Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of his brethren, I learned, had fled Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Christians as targets

For whatever reason, the dictator protected the Christians of Iraq. With his protection removed, the Christians were the targets of murder, kidnappings and bombings at the hands of their more extreme Muslim neighbors.

When I inquired of an American commander about the possibility of attending worship at the main church in Mosul, he explained this was not possible. American troops stayed far away from Christian gatherings, fearing the American presence might cause the persecuted worshippers to become an even bigger target for attacks.

Looking back on my experiences in northern Iraq, I remember the warmth of the Yazidi and Christian people I met there — their smiles, firm handshakes, and hospitality. Of course, Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims I met in Iraq were kind as well, but I think what makes the Yazidis

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Displaced Iraqis from the Yazidi community settle under a bridge on Thursday in Dahuk, 260 miles northwest of Baghdad, Iraq.

Khalid Mohammed/AP

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and Christians stand out in my mind is that they were so unexpected — a surprising island of spiritual diversity in what seemed to be a Muslim sea.

Now I can't help but wonder how many of the people I saw in the village are dead. And what became of the church in Mosul? How could members of two faiths that took root in the area hundreds of years ago, and weathered the storms of so many wars and empires, be cut down so unbelievably quickly by one group of nihilistic murderers?

It's easy for me to be angry at the ISIS terrorists. But *it's also tempting to wonder what would have happened to these people had we not removed Saddam's protection from them in 2003.*

It's also heartbreaking to think of all the dangerous,

deadly work I watched our soldiers do in places where ISIS now reigns, and all the sacrifice of my American friends' blood, without feeling despair and hopelessness. But grief and sadness do nothing to roll back the tide of extremism that has washed this historic land in blood — the blood of Yazidis, Christians, and Muslims.

Our leaders, and those of allied nations, must carefully count the cost of further action in this war-torn land. We owe no less to the people I met there in 2010, and to our friends in uniform who gave their lives to make it safe for people of all faiths.

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