

## **Interview with Moyad al-Haidari**

*Broadcaster, RFE/RL's Iraq Service*

*Former Baghdad Bureau Chief, 2004-2007*

September 10, 2009

**RFE/RL:** What was your life in Iraq like before 2003?

**Moyad al-Haidari:** Well, as a lot of Iraqis who stayed in Iraq, [I] didn't leave it for different reasons. I stayed with my family, with my sons, trying to deal with the situation during the period of Saddam's regime. It's difficult to be aware [of] a lot of dangers, to...have a different idea or different point of view, especially since I dealt with the media and with the cultural atmosphere. Also, I had some activity in painting, and I had my own studio. So I tried hard to isolate myself from the [political] crisis which could put me in a very bad [situation], and on the other hand continue life and support my family and my sons, to educate them, to teach them how to deal with such a complicated situation. You know, to be on the safe side in such a situation is not easy -- to [avoid] problems, [stay] away from conflicts, and moderate everything. Since the [1970s] I had some activity in the media, I wrote many articles, many poems, and some cultural criticism about art [and] about painting. I participated in some painting activities as a painter inside Iraq and...participating and sharing with Iraqi artists abroad.

**RFE/RL:** How did things change after 2003?

**Al-Haidari:** After the change of the regime in 2003, a lot of things changed suddenly. What happened was [that] before, people were under pressure, under control, restricted...suddenly everything became free, no control, in a way no feeling of responsibility. Decades of controlling in this way [now] became free, so it kind of ruined the structure of the state, ruined even the normal communication [between people], and suddenly the people — most, not all the people -- didn't know how to deal with this new freedom. So I was the witness of this critical period of the Iraqi people, and how a lot of them lost their coordination [in] how they will deal with the new situation.

**RFE/RL:** How did you come to work for Radio Free Iraq?

**Al-Haidari:** What happened later is that there became a need [to figure out] how to grow again, how to [rebuild our lives]...at the moment of the change of the regime I took my responsibility as a patriot, as an Iraqi citizen, and let me say as [someone] educated and active in the cultural atmosphere, how to [find] my role: how to build my country, how to defend my people, how to help them to know how to move [forward]. So I began with some friends as a kind of NGO without really establishing [it], but we began as individuals to send messages to the people [about] how to support themselves, how to think [about] the future, how to invest the wide freedom they got after the change.

At that time, one month after the change, I had a contact with a friend of mine who worked with Radio Free Europe, actually the [former] director of the Iraqi service here in Prague, he was there in Baghdad. We shared many friends, we knew each other since the [1970s], so he asked me to join the radio. At the beginning I thought, "Is it right to be a correspondent? How can I use this technique to serve my people, to serve my message?" Actually, I believe this is a [mission] for me. Day by day, I discovered that the work with Radio Free Iraq was really the best choice I [made] in my life. Because really, it [fulfilled] my personal need to have a tool to...serve the people, trying to give them the message they need. This is one thing. The other is that the technique of the broadcasting – I wasn't a professional in it, I was a journalist and a writer, but I got the secret and the password of radio work. Really, it's clever because you deal with only one sense: hearing, listening. So you have to have effect, to give your message, to play the game well and to give the [correct] ideas. Day by day I learned, and till now I feel I am still learning every day a new step to [give me] the right tools to do better and better.

**RFE/RL:** What kind of threats do RFI's journalists face?

**Al-Haidari:** Actually after 2005-2006, a lot of Iraqi journalists and foreigners faced real difficulties, a lot of insurgents [were] trying to kidnap or kill [them], and...Iraqi journalists faced a really complicated situation. It was the most dangerous area [of work] in Iraq, especially in Baghdad. Two of my colleagues were killed in 2007 – [Khamail \[Muhsin Khalaf\]](#) and [Nazar \[Abd al-Wahid al-Radhi\]](#), we lost them. The lady, Khamail, was kidnapped and after two days we found her body killed, and two months [later] we also lost one of my colleagues Nazar in Amarah, which is south of Baghdad. As bureau chief, I tried hard to behave [bravely], to give my colleagues some encouragement, to support them, to be balanced in their work and to protect their daily situation. Of course, all of us had to move [around] to follow the stories, to bring materials, so we really found [it] a difficult situation -- how to find the source, and to go to the source of news, and to participate in [covering] the [press conferences], in events, in accidents, in explosions, and on the other hand trying to protect ourselves. Unfortunately, as I told you, we lost two of my colleagues, and we had another colleague, Jumana [al-Obaidi], who [was kidnapped for around two weeks](#) by insurgents, but she [was] released, *al-hamdulillah* [praise God].

**RFE/RL:** What threats have you personally faced?

**Al-Haidari:** Personally, I received many threats by e-mail, by telephone, and even my family was threatened that some of them will be kidnapped, killed, or harmed. But I decided to continue, and not stop [my work]. On the other hand I tried not to send this personal fear to my people, to my colleagues in the bureau, but [instead] transfer to them how to be clever and brave, to support themselves. Of course, the headquarters in Prague took a lot of attention about our safety there [in Iraq], and the good thing is that we never stopped [broadcasting], even at the end of 2005, when our building there in Baghdad was exploded by a severe car [bomb]. There was really severe damage, but *al-hamdulillah* [praise God] there wasn't anybody there in the office [at the time]. It was very early in the morning, maybe 7:00 in the morning. When I arrived, it was still smoking, and some fire -- but it was okay, just damage to the building.

**RFERL:** Why did you have to leave Iraq?

**Al-Haidari:** The last event happened in beginning of July 2007. I used to stay at the office, sleeping there, working there 24 hours sometimes, just go and bring the materials and make the interviews for my programs or some reports. I was trying not to go home because of the distance, there were some checkpoints for insurgents, and there was a fear that I would be easy to recognize and then maybe killed or kidnapped. So...after two weeks [in which] I hadn't been at my home, I thought it was safe, so I left in the afternoon [to go] from the office to my home. On the way I noticed by chance, absolutely by chance -- one of the security lessons [they gave us on] how to [keep] yourself [safe] is to look in your car [rear-view] mirror, if there is the same car or the same people still following you. And by chance, I noticed that there was a car, I remember it was black, a Toyota, with three people [inside]. So I stopped a while just to make a fake, then I drove [again], and what happened was also again I found the same car after me. Then the time came that hour of the afternoon in Iraq [when because of] the security situation, there was nobody in the streets, only checkpoints, and you can't trust them because we don't know whether these checkpoints are false or true. Because we have a story [about] some friend who was kidnapped by a false checkpoint.

So it was a game, and I drove fast, trying to escape, then I discovered there was not only one car -- there were two cars. [The other] one was a Daewoo, I remember. They pushed me to enter one highway, trying to push me, [waving] their guns to stop. This is what I discovered, they want to kidnap me, not to kill me, [which] means there is a message [from their leaders to do this]. But what happened by miracle, at that moment, a group of cars, four wheel drive -- [they were] civilian, but we know its used by some embassies, some American groups, even some Iraqi VIPs as a patrol group [of a motorcade]. At that moment, they entered that same street. So I drove very fast parallel with them. It give me some kind of protection, but what was dangerous was that the group of cars thought that maybe I was suicide bomber, so they also showed me their [weapons] to tell me to go away. So I was pushed in two [directions] -- really a critical moment, it was really difficult. Those people thought maybe I am a danger to them, and [yet] the other insurgents were still following me. But by miracle, as I told you, I drove very fast to try to escape, and they continued [after me] with their guns. Anyway, I went to some area near my house, got

some support from friends, I [hid] my car and asked for some help [to protect me] -- some of my friends also had guns. So anyway, it was an indication that [the insurgents] want me. So my bosses here in Prague agreed that the situation would not be easy, [I would] have to stay for a while, and after two or three days I got some support, also with some bodyguards, to go to the airport. Then I moved to Amman, Jordan, and I stayed two weeks in Amman, then I asked to come to Prague. Now I [have] settled in Prague, joined my colleagues here, [and] continue my message in a different location. I feel I am in the same rhythm, in the same mood to continue the message which I [enjoy] and feel I am responsible for as a member of Radio Free Iraq -- to give the message to my people, the Iraqis.

**RFE/RL:** And your family? Did they have to leave Iraq as well?

**Al-Haidari:** As I told you, when I began to receive threats, as well as some to my family, I faced a problem. My son's [university] colleague, he was very friendly, kind of one of the members of our family, and once he borrowed the car of my son. What happened was that he was kidnapped -- this guy, his name is Amir -- and killed later, we found his body. So we got the message that maybe [the insurgents] want my son, because of the car -- they recognized it as his car. After this happened, I pushed my wife, and one of my sons, to leave Baghdad [around] two months before I left, and my other [son] left also after I left Baghdad, because it became [too] dangerous to be there, because we believed [the insurgents] wanted me or somebody from my family.

**RFE/RL:** Despite the challenges you've faced, why do you continue working for Radio Free Iraq?

**Al-Haidari:** I remember when the explosion of the bureau building happened, it was a message, not just for us because there was another foreign media in the same building, Al-Hamra [Hotel] in Baghdad. So some bosses here in Prague, I remember some bosses in Prague...called me and said "Moyad, shall we close the office, shall we stop for a while, it's becoming dangerous." And I said "No, no, this is what the insurgents want, to stop our voice. I believe we have to continue more [in] concentrating on our message." And the same thing happened when Khamail was killed, and even Nazar. We believe that it kind of amplified [that we must] we use our material to fight, to give the message, to give the meaning of freedom the meaning of democracy to support the people -- not to be a slave for the insurgents and the extremists. Personally I believe in this way.

So why do I continue? As a person of cause, I feel I have to continue. I feel this is kind of my [personal] target, and...this message is very important to the people. And let me say, we receive every day a very good response, a very excellent response. Once, for a whole month we didn't receive a [single] negative response from people via SMS, [though] of course they had the right to send anything. But to receive such recommendation from people that you are great, you tell us the truth, you are the balance...this is great. That means the world to us, that we are in the right position, and we have to continue.

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