

OMAR X
October 20, 2007

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hello, Omar.

OMAR X: Hello Charles, how are you?

CHARLES FERGUSON: I'm fine. How are you, Omar?

OMAR X: I am fine.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Let me begin by asking you to describe your background and your family's background; where you're from, where you were born and raised, your family.

OMAR X: I was born in Baghdad. And I mean, I lived with my family, my family consists of my – I mean before was my father, who was a retired military officer; and my mother, she's a teacher as well. I mean they raised me with my siblings; I have an older brother and a sister who is younger than me and two younger brothers. We all lived in Baghdad. I graduated from the medical college in Baghdad and I worked as a doctor 'til 2005, when I changed to journalism.

I worked with George Packer and with NPR; then Guardian Films, where I started to make documentaries about Iraq.

We had an ordinary life. I mean we were like middle class people that – we were living fine 'til the last year, when things became really worse in Baghdad and we started to face problems.

First my older brother was kidnapped, and they shot him in the head, and luckily he survived. He didn't die. But he lost one eye and he lost the sight of the other eye. And then my younger brothers were kidnapped in January. They took them when they got out from school. And I did my best to get them back. I started to call some people I know from my work, some political people, and also I get them back. But in, last June my father was kidnapped and really, I wasn't lucky to get him back. He was killed the same day they took him, according to the police, and we find his body a week after, at Baghdad morgue.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Do you know who kidnapped and killed your father?

OMAR X: Well, according to the witnesses that saw, the people who took him, they [are in the army, militia] because they are controlling the neighborhood where he was, and also because there's no reason to kill him, unless it's the sectarian things, because he was 60 years old man and he wasn't doing anything. He's like an old man; he doesn't have any – so I think the reason for that is a sectarian thing.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Why were your younger brothers kidnapped?

OMAR X: They had school that day. And after they finished the school, they were walking, trying to come back home, and they took them from the street in front of their school.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Why? Was that sectarian, or was it for money?

OMAR X: Well, actually I have no idea. I mean I think it's maybe because – I mean there's a lot of things, but I'm not sure from any, maybe because of money but then they realize that we don't have so much money. I doubt it much because of my job, but, you know, that they would target me, not my brothers. But, you know, Charles, in Baghdad, you can't find a real explanation for any accidents, for every accident, because they are just too many, and sometimes it happens for no reason.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And your older brother getting shot; why was that, what happened there?

OMAR X: That was also sectarian. Because they took him with seven other people from the shop where they were working, and they shot the whole seven people. He was the only one who survived, because the hospital on that day received seven bodies. And they discovered that he was still alive among them.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Is that why you decided to leave; because everybody in your family was getting kidnapped and killed?

OMAR X: Well, you know, that happened recently, especially with my father. I mean I already applied for the Fulbright a year and a half ago.

Yeah, I mean it's really difficult for me to live more in Baghdad. But the Fulbright thing, it was applied like a year and a half ago, and it just came at the right time. Sometimes I feel that I was lucky that I applied and have been enrolled in this scholarship. Otherwise, where I would go?

CHARLES FERGUSON: And how about your family leaving? I assume that your family left because...

OMAR X: Because we lost our house, Charles. And after my father was killed and after my brothers were kidnapped, we started to plan to leave, at least for them to leave Iraq. But it took a very long time for them to get the passports. I mean they got their passports like two weeks after my father was killed. So it was already a plan, you know, for them to leave Baghdad. Because after they were kidnapped, we stopped them from going to school, and they were spending time hiding at home. So they really became depressed and they felt like their lives stopped at that point. So I was trying to get them out. But because of the passports, we were late, and we lost our father.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Why did you lose your house?

OMAR X: Because we left the house and, you know, because our neighborhood is under – most of the neighborhoods in Baghdad under the control of the militia, and any empty house, they took it. So when my father was kidnapped, my mother and my younger brothers had to leave the house. And like a week after, they came, and they broke [into the] house and they took it.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Took it, meaning that somebody else moved in?

OMAR X: Well I don't know; really now, we lost contact in the area. But at first, the neighbors were telling us, they broke the outer door and they took – everything was in the garden. Then, like two days later they came and they went inside and they stayed and they took a lot of stuff.

Well, that's also, you know, I thought it's very dangerous for my family or for me to go back, because I think now they saw a lot of evidences of my work or, you know, other things – there's a computer there, there's some footage, other things.

So yeah, we lost our house. I mean, I've left the house a long while before my brothers and – after my brothers were kidnapped and my father was kidnapped, but my family was living there. But at the same time, my brothers were only hiding at home, because it was very dangerous for them to go outside or to go to school, especially after they were kidnapped.

CHARLES FERGUSON: How about the rest of your family; your cousins, you grandparents?

OMAR X: Also scattered. Some have left the country, especially the young people. Some of them are in Jordan, some in Syria; some managed to reach Europe, to Sweden. But mainly, the older people are still in Baghdad.

CHARLES FERGUSON: The older people.

OMAR X: Yeah. I mean like my aunts, who are very old women, like in their seventies; they're still living at their houses in Baghdad, despite the risk. But they think that they will not be hurt, because they are old women. But they managed to send their sons, their daughters outside Iraq or outside Baghdad. Some are living in Kurdistan; some are living in the southern provinces like Najaf, where it's considered to be safe. So it's really, yeah, it's kind of, they scattered.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Is your entire family Sunni?

OMAR X: No, we are mixed; I mean my mother is a Shiite.

CHARLES FERGUSON: But that did not provide any protection from the Mahdi Army?

OMAR X: No, no. Those militia are really just killing – the Shiite militias kill Shiite people and the Sunni also kill Sunni people. It's just by name they are representing a sect, but in reality, it's, [UI]. I mean I'm a Sunni, but I can't get protection from Sunni militia or from insurgents; they will kill me for stupid reasons, like the way I dress, the way I cut my hair, or even if they know that I'm working, something. So it's not like if you are a Sunni and you are with the Sunni insurgents that you are in heaven, they're gonna protect you. It's not like that.

CHARLES FERGUSON: So you weren't sufficiently fundamentalist, was part of the problem also; not sufficiently, you were too secular.

OMAR X: Um hm. Yeah, sure. You know, that's the point; most Iraqis who are secular or well educated, they left the country, because, either they'd been killed, or they left the country, because they just can't [live the life of militia].

CHARLES FERGUSON: Let me ask you a little bit about the time when you were working as a journalist. If I recall, you told me that you didn't tell anyone, not even your family, what you were doing for work.

OMAR X: Yeah, that's right.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Tell me how come.

OMAR X: Well, you know, since the moment I started working with foreigners, I knew that it was a huge risk for my life. So I preferred at the same to keep my family out from it. And I was lucky, because when my brothers were kidnapped, they beated them, they interrogated them. So good thing that they didn't know about my, they didn't know any details about my job; otherwise they might say something.

Those were my thoughts; is to keep this for myself, because it's very dangerous, it's very risky, and it's better that nobody should know about it. That was the main reason.

And also, maybe my father or my mother, maybe at that time would not allow me to do this because, you know, everybody in Iraq believe that working with foreigners, and especially Americans, is something that you can get killed very easily.

So I started, you know, when I started working, I preferred to keep it to myself. And [it's part from] the security plan that I draw for myself is to keep that only for myself, and only one or two from my closest friends only to know about it, so in case something happened that they have an idea, or they can reach somebody, or somebody from outside can reach them.

And it went fine. I mean, I always thought about this, and I always think that I did the right thing by not telling my family.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Do they know now?

OMAR X: Not exactly. I mean, after what happened to my father, I've seen my mother like two times only. And it was really a bad time for her, so I just didn't tell her anything. And after that, they all leave to Syria, at the end of July. Then I came here at the end of August

She knew now that I had some work with foreigners, especially the fact that I came to America. Because in Iraq now, everybody coming to America, so he was working with the Americans.

CHARLES FERGUSON: What do you think is going to happen to Iraq now?

OMAR X: Well, I mean, the killings, the destructions will continue. Nothing will change. It was getting worse every day. And it will go like that. I mean, Baghdad now is like divided city; neighborhoods have been cleaned according to the sects. And people from one neighborhood, they are very scared to go through other neighborhoods. So I think it will go like this.

But I think it might getting more worse by having full-scale civil war, like neighborhoods fighting, like Sunni neighborhood fighting a Shiite neighborhood. Especially if the American troops left. So after that, the militia have an open field to fight, so they can escalate the fightings. And instead of killings and kidnappings and fake checkpoints from time to time, they gonna have an open war.

CHARLES FERGUSON: So do you think that the American surge has had any effect, or not?

OMAR X: You mean the security plan they did? No, it didn't change anything. And the evidence for that is my father was kidnapped and killed in June, and a lot of people were killed also after the security plan was implanted.

The thing is that during this security plan, the American troops depended on the Iraqi security forces. And this is the main problem we have now in Iraq, is nobody understands that the Iraqi government and the Iraqi security forces are really not a neutral, efficient government or forces. They all belong to parties, they are all working according to external agendas, and they have their own plans that they want to implant.

So I mean, you can't create a safe world, a neutral safe world, or a secure Baghdad with such people, with such a government and such security forces; and that's what the Americans rely on. I mean, they paid a lot of money to train the Iraqi forces and to recruit them. But what [are the] benefits? I mean if they were good forces, we would have had security a long time ago. But no, they don't do that.

I mean, on my neighborhood, there were the checkpoints, the Iraqi police checkpoints. When the fighting [would start], they were riding their cars [and trying to] escape because they think, we don't want to fight, we can't fight them — the insurgency — and we don't want to fight the militias; and we might be killed, we might be killed. So why bother? We are working only for half salaries.

So they have flown away. And that is what was happening. When the shooting start, when the clashes start, they just disappear and they come back when things are calm.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And the increase in American troop levels in Baghdad has not had any effect?

OMAR X: I told you; because they're depending on the Iraqi forces and the Iraqi government. So I mean, no matter how much their numbers or how much their forces, they are depending on the Iraqis, because they are trying now to hand over the responsibility to the Iraqi forces. And that's what really makes things deteriorate.

CHARLES FERGUSON: How about government services; electricity, water?

OMAR X: Till the day I left Baghdad, there was no electricity. We had water like two hours per day. No services. The garbage was piled in the street, like, you know, [mountains of garbage and sewage was flooding the streets]. No government services at all on all the bases.

I mean, that's another problem that makes your life miserable in Iraq. It's not only the security; it's not only you are scared that you will lose your life at any moment. I mean the concept of living in Baghdad is trying to survive the day. But what makes it hard for you is the lack of services. The temperature in summer reaches very high, like 50 Celsius, and you have nothing to cool the room that you are sitting in.

I remember, I was sleeping at night — sweating, all my body is sweating — and I feel my brain is boiling, and there is not even cold water that I can drink. And when I go to the water [UI] [that at least] I can have water, there's no water, and I have to use the water from the tank, this old tank over the roof which was under the sun for the whole day, and the water is really, really hot, and you can't drink it.

So it's lack of services, and actually, there's no services at all.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And that is continuing to get worse?

OMAR X: It was getting worse, I told you. And I don't think it's improved now. I mean I've left Baghdad two months, less than two months now, and I never heard from anybody there that things were improved. Twenty-four hours, no electricity, no water, water that come like maybe two hours or

three per day. The garbage are collected in the streets, the sewage water flooding the streets. It's horrible, it's disgusting, it's very difficult to go through. But we were depending on generators, we had to worry about the fuel. We had to buy it from the black market. And sometimes when there were, [there was base of] curfews, the one liter of fuel could reach to, from the black market. I mean we bought like 20 liters of fuel by 60,000 Iraqi Dinar; which nearly \$50, just for 20 liters. But we had to do that, so that we can run the generator so we can operate fans. Fans often do nothing in 50-degree Celsius, but at least you have some air.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Omar, what, if anything, do you think the United States can or should do in Iraq now?

OMAR X: Well, they should have controlled the thing by themselves. I mean the main stakes is the election and the government. I mean, they did well by making the Allawi government. And people, 'til now, they talking about Allawi's [day], and Allawi [UI] the prime minister of the [first-term] government. Things were improving, even on security level. But then everything started to collapse after the election and the Jafari government started to take over, you know, [he has] [started] [despot]. At that time the political parties started to take control, and they started to impose their agendas, and we had all the sectarian problems.

CHARLES FERGUSON: So what do you think the United States can or should do now? Or is there nothing the United States can do?

OMAR X: Well, now I don't think they can do anything. I mean, the only thing — and I know it might be impossible, but I was speaking with my friends and with the people I know when I was in Baghdad — is if the United States make a war again on Iraq and occupied Iraq as it did at first time, when they removed Saddam. If they did that again and they removed those corrupted parties and they removed this government and started to do things in the right way, maybe they will change something. But I know that's something impossible and the United States will never do it.

And it might also not happen because now we have so many militias, we have so many gangs, we have so many insurgents. I mean we have now so many fighters that getting money and weapons from outside Iraq, it's not like what it was in 2003.

Well, I think there's nothing the United States can do anymore to improve things in Iraq, and I think they are gonna leave Iraq soon. And at that time, the disaster will happen. And that's what I'm seeing for my country. I see a really bad picture for it. I don't think I'll ever see the old Baghdad that I know. I never think that I'll see it again.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Do you think that maybe in five, ten years?

OMAR X: No, no, no way, Charles. First of all, so far we still have the destructions and the killings. And you know, the killing, it has increased the hatred, the sectarian gaps between the people. And now everybody seeks revenge; everybody wants to know what's happened to his loved one that was killed and he wants to get revenge.

So we need a long time for this to stop. And after that, you will need a long time to reconstruct and rebuild this destruction.

So I don't know, maybe 50 years or so. But it depends on when those people in Iraq will have enough from the killings and they will get satisfied by the blood that's been dropped so far. And I don't know when that [will be], because 'til now, I don't see anybody saying that's enough, we had enough from killings, we should sit and talk and become modern people and we should start to live our life not killing people. I don't know when this will happen and I don't think it will be soon. And after this will happen, we'll need years and years from reconstructions and rebuilding in order to be like what we've been before.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Do you think that it will make a difference if the United States keeps forces in Iraq?

OMAR X: I told you; when clashes happen between two neighbors or two sects fighting in the street, usually what stops that is when the American troops interfere; that's the only thing that stops this one. So their presence in Iraq is what really stops a full-scale civil war, the street fighting. Because our

security forces, as I told you; when things happen, they just drive their cars and escape, and the fightings continue 'til the moment when the troops come to see what is going on, then everybody is hide.

I know it's not a solution. But at least it saves people's lives for a while. I mean, Americans can't do anything for the kidnapping or for the fake checkpoints or the killings. But they controlling this huge full-scale civil war.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Do you think it makes a difference whether the Americans continue to support the central government or not?

OMAR X: Well, they should stop the [UI] government. I mean, that's the problem. I mean, now how many years [UI] elected government, Jafari government, which started in 2005, and now Maliki, which almost will be two years. And it's very obvious that things are deteriorated. So why supporting them? And they know very well, they know very well that the, al-Maliki is supporting al-Mahdi Army, which is the main enemy for the American troops; as they saying now, it's even more dangerous than Al Qaeda. And they know that the Iraqi army is infiltrated by the al-Mahdi Army, sorry, the Iraqi police is infiltrated by the Mahdi Army militia. So why supporting them? They know very well that they are doing bad things and they know very well that they are a major part of the problem, so why are they supporting them? I don't know, really.

CHARLES FERGUSON: If I recall, the Interior Ministry is controlled by SCIRI, yeah?

OMAR X: That's right. It's controlled by SCIRI. But when al-Jafari came in, and also now al-Maliki, the main support for them is by al-Mahdi Army, so they don't do anything for al-Mahdi Army. Besides, SCIRI was in control of the Interior Ministry in al-Jafari government time. Then, after that, when they start recruiting the police, a lot of al-Mahdi Army militia came and went into these forces. And they became part of [UI]. Because in some areas, the Mahdi Army militia is doing patrolling for Mahdi Army at the same time when they do the patrolling as an Iraqi police. And it's very well known and very obvious. It's in Sadr City, it's in [UI] town, in a lot of different districts of Baghdad, people there know very well that the same al-Mahdi Army people are the same who are the police people who are responsible of this area.

So it's obvious that their loyalty is not for the country, it's not for Baghdad, it's not for Iraq; it's for their army, it's for their militias, it's for their leaders, for whoever is supporting them, whoever paying their salaries.

CHARLES FERGUSON: What is the relationship like now between the Badr organization and the Mahdi Army? I understand that occasionally...

OMAR X: Um hm. There are lots of problems. Yeah, but al-Mahdi Army is very strong army. They have very, very huge number of people. I mean, they are very powerful regarding the number of members. And also they get funds now, because now they have weapons and they have salaries, get paid from outside.

There were a lot of problems between them and SCIRI. And in real life, they really hate each other. I mean, I know, I have talked a lot to some al-Mahdi Army people and they were very eager to destroy SCIRI.

But sometimes they keep their political lines by not doing these meetings, or doing these speeches or agreements between the two groups. But you've seen, al-Mahdi Army killed a lot of the SCIRI governors in the south of Iraq. And a lot of problems, a lot of problems happen between the two sides along the past years.

Like al-Mahdi Army, several times they destroyed SCIRI offices. And at the same time, in the last year mainly, they targeted their high-rank members in the provinces.

So they hate each other. Now it's like this; it's not like Sunni and Shia are fighting each other; we have several groups [UI] who are also fighting each other.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Do you think that it had to be this way? Do you think that it was inevitable that this would result, or do you think if the Americans had behaved differently that this could have been different?

OMAR X: Well, I never thought that it will be like this way. When the Americans came to Iraq, everybody was saying that things will improve and things will change, we'll have freedom and democracy. So we never thought it will be like this.

But then we started to see, like the evidences of what we are now. I mean, when they started to do things that – when they start to listen to people who don't know anything about Iraq, and they were doing things that was unreasonable to the Iraqi situations; like the dismissing of the Iraqi army and the power and the money that they gave to the political parties, that they came from outside, and they just gave them the power to control Iraq. Again, all other things, like al-Mahdi Army was growing and getting stronger and bigger in front of the American eyes, and they never did anything for it.

And so far, I mean, as I told you, the Americans know very well that the government is corrupted, they don't do anything to improve the situations in Iraq. But despite that, they keep saying they are supporting the Iraqi government and they're depending on the Iraqi government. But really, I don't know why.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Oh dear. Yeah.

OMAR X: Well, Charles, it's really complicated. I mean... And it became more complicated with all this killings and with all those groups who are interfering. I mean, every enemy for America now is focusing on Iraq, and he believe or he want to attack America in Iraq. Everybody is waiting for America to fail, to announce their failure in Iraq, so that they can get advantage of it. And they are working hard to do that by funding the Sunni insurgency in Iraq, by funding the Shia militia; by doing a lot of things.

So it's not like a problem that belongs to somebody else, some group that you can go and speak to and fix. It's a very big problem and very complicated. And you don't know from where it starts or for where it will take you; it's just something you don't know about.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Thank you, Omar.

OMAR X: Sure. Thank you very much. I really appreciate it.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Thank you again. Thank you again. Take care.

OMAR X: Okay. Bye-bye.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Bye-bye.

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