Working in Iraq: The choice between safe and right?

IESE MBA grad Ammar Al-Rikabi reflects on February 2015: the day Baghdad's decade-old curfew was lifted - and violence once again gripped the nation.

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What do you do if what feels right and what is safe are incompatible? Emotional and ethical motivations can collide with security and self-interest when your homeland is Iraq.

When Ammar Al-Rikabi (MBA '10) accepted a job with a bank in Iraq, it wasn't just the usual motivations that drew him to it. He had left the country of his birth at the age of nine, and knowing the difficult times it was going through, he felt a need to help in some way.

The job, developing private-sector infrastructure investment, seemed a worthwhile way to help Iraq move forward in troubled times. It would mean spending time away from his family in Europe and his girlfriend in Turkey, but both were supportive.

Rikabi knew that personal security was an issue in Iraq, but after a summer internship the year before, he concluded he understood the risks. The job was interesting, and a promise from his boss to help him transfer to the bank's London office at the end of the summer helped make up his mind. He took the job.

Then his bank was the target of suicide bombers in June 2010.

In this first-person case study, supervised by IESE's **Alberto Ribera**, Rikabi reflects on his experience working in Iraq and the many questions it raised as his sense of purpose came into conflict with other considerations about what was right.

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Structural instability

Baghdad in June 2010 was a different place than the city Rikabi had experienced just a year before. While sectarian violence between Sunni and Shiite factions had decreased, unsuccessful parliamentary elections had led to a political stalemate. "The power vacuum had been filled with violence," Rikabi writes. Moreover, U.S. troops were due to pull out in September to make way for an Iraqi security force; the levels of violence looked likely to surge higher. Was al-Qaida behind some of the new wave of attacks? The truth was that no one really knew.

Rikabi found the situation on the ground to be tense. In mid-June, bombers and gunmen attacked the Central Bank of Iraq. The attackers, it seems, were led by someone determined to destroy the economic infrastructure of the country, and he began to worry that his job would make him a target. Still, the only way to put such thoughts out of his head seemed to be to throw himself into his work.

A bad day at the office

On the morning of June 20th, Rikabi was brainstorming ideas for a large-scale infrastructure project aimed at helping Iraq get back on its feet. Around 10:30 a.m., he left his bank to get something to drink. By 11 a.m. he was taking a bathroom break. As he was washing his hands he heard a sound like thunder followed by high-pitched screaming. A cloud of dust blew in the window behind him.

Bombs always come in twos here, he thought numbly, and even as the words formed there were more bangs and another cloud of dust. Back out in the hall, Rikabi found panic and chaos, with doors blown in, glass shattered and papers scattered everywhere. He also saw one dazed-looking security guard wandering about, bleeding from the head. Yet everyone else seemed fine. Was it possible there had been no casualties?

Later he learned that 26 people had died, all of them outside the building, after a security guard, in his last act, had closed the gate on a suicide bomber. Another bomber had barreled in after with more explosives, but fallen into the hole left by the first. The street outside was littered with rubble and with the dead and wounded.

His bank had been the intended target of the bombers, but it was still standing, thanks to the security personnel and effective blast walls.

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Pulling together through times of trouble

"Don't worry," said his housekeeper, later that afternoon in the residential compound where he lived. "You've just had your first boom."

In the midst of the stress and disillusionment, Rikabi was impressed by the community spirit he saw everywhere around him. People worked hard to make him laugh. A friend quietly gave his laptop a deep clean to remove all traces of the dust from the bomb. He saw the surviving security personnel laughing and playing football -- getting on with life in the midst of crisis. Meanwhile, his bank's investment team moved their operations to the residential compound, for safety's sake, and worked harder than ever, even holding meetings at 1 a.m. It was a time of confusion and fear, but also of inspiring work ethics and camaraderie.

Even so, the blasts had shaken Rikabi's sense of what was the right thing to do. Not only was his safety clearly at risk, but he also started reconsidering his reasons for being in the country. What was the point in working to improve Iraq when some of his fellow Iraqis targeted the very enterprises that were trying to help them? He was working in part to support his mother, but was it fair to risk his life to that end? Since he had the option of getting out of Iraq, how much was he prepared to risk for the altruism of staying?

Ammar Al-Rikabi worked with Professor Alberto Ribera on a series of first-person case studies covering his summer internship in 2009, his first summer of full employment (as discussed here) and then two more on what happened in the following four years in terms of his career and the geopolitical and economic developments in Iraq, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan. The cases include facts about Iraq and Rikabi's immediate and subsequent thoughts on his circumstances. One exhibit is a reprint of Rikabi's letter written less than 24 hours after surviving the bombing of his bank.

Case studies are meant to serve as launching points for class discussion. This dramatic case raises questions about doing what is right on a personal, professional and ethical level. Would you continue to work after the bombing? Why or why not?

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