

UN should never be a target, Baghdad bombing survivors stress, 15 years after deadly attack

From the UN News archive: 'I could only really see the haze' – Nada Al Nashif and Khaled Mansour



UN Photo/Mark Garten

United Nations staff members march around the Secretariat in New York to express their distress over the bombing of the UN Headquarters in Baghdad on 19 August. In the background are the flags of the United Nations members. (26 August 2003)

Since the 2003 Canal Hotel terrorist attack, which Secretary-General at the time, Kofi Annan, referred to as [“the darkest day in our lives at the United Nations”](#), we have looked back on the day through the memories and recollections of UN staff who survived.

Nada Al-Nashif. *Photo: UNESCO*

Khaled Mansour. *UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré*

Among those who told their story back in 2009, were Nada Al Nashif, a Jordanian national of Palestinian origin, who was sitting around a table with colleagues in UN Headquarters, when the explosives detonated, bursting her eardrum in the process. Her desk was swept away by the blast.

Khaled Mansour, an Egyptian who arrived to witness a scene of carnage, offering help, remembers seeing the bloody palm prints of the wounded, as they tried to escape, and a ticking watch on the wrist of a dead colleague emerging from under a sheet, as their body was carried away on a makeshift stretcher.

You can read their full account of the day, [by clicking the link here](#).

Andrew Clapham



UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferre

“There was a general sense that things were turning more violent. It was also extremely hot. It was about 50 degrees and there was not much electricity to make the air conditioners work and water was not always easy to come by. So, there was a general mounting tension – both climatic and also political.

When the explosion happened, I was extremely fortunate because I was on my own, but there was no flying glass and no flying structures because I was in this solid underground bathroom structure. I can remember the biggest sort of noise I’ve ever heard in my life. And then the lights went out so I was completely in the dark. And then I remember being sort of trapped a bit but being able to free myself, finding in the dark some stairs, and then seeing a lot of what I suppose can only be described as walking wounded people. Really wounded, trying to find the daylight.

My wife was also working for the UN... I heard her voice fairly early on calling my name, so we found each other quite quickly.

My wife [Mona Rishmawi] was also working for the UN. She was the human rights and gender adviser to Sergio [Vieira de Mello], so at that point, my thought was to see if she was ok. And I heard her voice fairly early on calling my name, so we found each other quite quickly. Then of course there was a lot of chaos trying to treat the very badly wounded people. I remember there was quite a lot of concern that there could be a second bomb and it was important to get people to a place of safety. My wife was quite badly injured, she was bleeding a lot and needed stitches so we had a helicopter eventually with the US army to a sort-of field hospital where I watched her stitched up, and unfortunately, I had to identify some of the colleagues who had been taken there and who had died, and nobody knew who they were. And then next I remember after the successful surgery on my wife them telling us that Sergio de Mello had been killed. Which of course we didn't believe at first. We thought it was just a rumor but as you know, it was unfortunately true... that was all a quite intense period.

We were extremely lucky. Other people as you know lost their limbs and were extremely injured. We've always been very grateful for how lucky we were. It was just a question of chance. My wife Mona was supposed to be in the meeting with Sergio and I should have been in my office which was destroyed.

The UN should not be a target...The message should go out that you cannot attack the UN. It's an international crime which will be prosecuted."

Andrew Clapham is Professor of Public International Law at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva. He worked as an Adviser on International Humanitarian Law to Sergio Vieira de Mello, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Iraq.

Mujahed Hassan



Photo courtesy of Mujahed Hassan

"It was the end of the day and I was just getting ready to go play table tennis with my colleagues. The window was to my left and, amazingly, I just decided to switch positions with one of my colleagues who left that day exactly at 4:30. Otherwise I would have been dead.

At that time we had no idea what an IED was, what a car bomb is. We had no idea that these things actually exist. I have never heard that this kind of explosion happened probably like, I think less than a month ago one targeted the Embassy of Jordan. As a result, one of my friends got killed. So we actually were wondering what happened. He had no idea that there was a car bomb or a trailer that came into the building and detonated. We were just looking around making sure what is happening. Is this like, is this for real? Is it just a dream? But I was off looking for my colleagues who were sharing the room, the IT department office with me, and they were found under the rubble.

It was really dusty and I couldn't see anything. I kept asking the handymen who were coming to help and the people just try to find them because I really cannot see them. Eventually it turned out that they had actually helped them. I was kind of in a shock. I was just trying to make sure that everybody's going to be safe and I did not know that my injury was severe enough that I had to be taken outside as soon as possible to receive medical care.

I was taken by helicopter to coalition forces facilities. I woke up after three days of losing consciousness, and found myself in the middle of nowhere in a tent. I was evacuated to Jordan, and then because of the severity of my injuries, I was again evacuated with my injured friend, Haider Sousa, to London. And then eventually all the other Iraqi injured stuff were also evacuated to London for follow up.

It took me more than 10 years to recover. Until today I'm still suffering from a lot of injuries and little sequences. I lost my left eye. I have a lot of injuries on my face, my lips, my head, my neck, my arms, my side.

I had just decided to switch seats with one of my colleagues who left that day exactly at 4:30pm. Otherwise I would have been dead by now.

As I'm speaking of it right now, I, I just remember exactly every single thing that happened that day. And when I returned to Iraq from London, I immediately took a taxi and went to the building and I walked through it floor by floor. The UN is my dream. The UN is my family. I really cannot believe that this thing happened to my family, to the place that I enjoyed working and to my colleagues that I consider my close family members.

I think the only thing that helped me recover is thinking of my fiancée at that time because she believed in me and we were planning our wedding. It was just a matter of days. We got everything ready and then the explosion

happened and we had to put everything on hold. I think that the only thing that's helped me to fight back to life...

Working at the UN was a dream. Every day, I would get ready and be excited to go to work to see what kind of a change I can contribute to and I can do to help my country to recover. In the beginning, working for the UNOHCI was about working to survive and support our families. But after UNAMI was created, we had high hopes that now we were to change the future because we really believed in Sergio Vieira de Mello. We were hoping that his team and himself specifically will make a big difference. We were so happy that we will be part of the change. We would be helping our country, our community, our people to recover from the oppression. So every single day was full of hope, full of enjoyment, full of possibilities. That this was the change we had been waiting for. Although it was not achieved, but I'm still hope that you will be able to, to make a difference in the life of the Arab world, and in specific the Iraqi community, Iraqi people.

I really believed that no Iraqi had any idea of what was supposed to come, the kind of violence we experienced, from the civil war that almost erupted, and all the destruction, killing, injustice and the corruption that happened afterwards. I was so happy, honestly and truly, every single day was the happiest day of my life. Looking back, I don't look that much towards my injuries, but I always look back with hope that whatever happened is going to teach us and the UN a lesson to make sure that this is not going to happen again.

I strongly believe that any civilian that is being killed by anybody, that this is an act of inhumanity, and this should be prevented at all costs."

Mujahed Hassan is an Iraqi colleague who worked in the IT Department at the time of the attack. He currently lives in San Diego, California, with his family.

Elpida Rouka



UN Photo/Violaine Martin

"I remember photographing the UN flag as we entered the compound around 3:45pm that day, on what was to be my last day on mission in Baghdad. That's the one picture – eerily blurred – that has survived among all my belongings in the attack, and my laissez-passer [UN passport] which came scorched and shrapneled to me, several months after the attack, to New York.

I went to my office which was exactly below Sergio's [Vieira de Mello] in that part of the building which is now the famous picture of the collapsed three floors in the ground. I was not supposed to be attending the meeting that my boss was having with [UN Humanitarian coordinator in Iraq] Ramiro Lopes da Silva across the corridor but exactly at 4:05 – the attack was at 4:15 – [my supervisor] Benon Sevan came back across the hallway and said, 'I think you should attend this meeting'. And literally 10 minutes later, I was sitting across from [head of the UN [World Health Organization](#) in Iraq] David Nabarro's assistant when I saw the diluting pupils, this light flashed first before we heard the thud and then felt the impact. And the next thing I knew was Benon grabbing me and Ramiro and crashing us to the floor to protect us from the flying shattered glass. Beyond that I have a huge gap, a blackout, in how I exited the room which was literally on the precipice where the second floor had collapsed and where Sergio, Arthur Helton and Gil Loescher were trapped. And when I came out onto the lawn, it was a scene of a massacre.

I was soon told I was non-essential despite my protestation at not wanting to leave the scene and sent to one of the US barracks which had become a triage hospital. I remember the moment that the news came through the walkie talkie to say that Sergio was gone. I remember I was the last one to be stitched up and wearing a t-shirt with "Operation Iraqi Freedom"; it was after the Baghdad curfew and the Americans suggested I stay overnight but I would have

none of it...I happened to stay at the by now haunted Cedar Hotel because it was the hotel where Sergio and his team were staying. So three floors were all rooms of ghosts. And I remember Ghassan Salameh putting a shashlik (skewer of grilled meat) and a stiff drink in front of me, and saying – drink up and go to bed. And three days later, I was on the last plane out evacuating the remaining survivors to Amman- same clothes for days and a semblance of a legit looking document to prove my identity, ashen look and all, flying out against a bleeding Baghdad sky.

I often think about the colleagues we lost that day and the age they were many in their early 30s – there was a certain buzz around that dream team, and they embodied exactly the spirit of the UN flag – defying risk, rising above politics, speaking up for those whose voices were silenced, pushing against all odds and keep going back.

I should say that during that attack, moments after, I had no sense of time, I was lucky that Benon threw the phone at me and said call your parents now. And I was lucky to catch them before the horrific images hit the screens of the world, and before all the landlines and phonelines went dead. Otherwise I dread to even think what my parents would have gone through had I not said – whatever you see, I'm ok, good bye. We didn't speak again for another four days. They've stayed glued to TV screens ever since.

I got my closure when I went back to Iraq four years later (a whole other story this one). Why I think it's important to remember August 2003 Baghdad is simply because it has essentially changed everything for the UN. How we do things. Who we are. What the world thinks of us. What we think of us. And that doesn't necessarily reflect only on those who we lost in Baghdad, but we have a responsibility I think to those friends and colleagues, and locals, lost in other places to this day – in Afghanistan, Mali, Somalia, Algeria, Libya, the list is endless.

I often think about the colleagues we lost that day and the age they had many in their early 30s – there was a certain buzz around that dream team, and they embodied exactly the spirit of the UN flag – defying risk, rising above politics, speaking up for those whose voices were silenced, pushing against all odds. It's 15 years later and I often think they would now be around their 40s and 50s, and the loss of potential, of people who believed in what they were doing, finding the sense of possible where no-one else could or would, the "UN blue" recruits as I call them. Those that wouldn't allow the UN blue flag of that sandstormy scorching hot August Baghdad day, to remain "blurred", neither for the outside world, nor for us.

We all have our own coping mechanisms. Mine back then was to return to work. And to continue non-stop in hardship posts for several years following my return to Baghdad in 2007. In many ways, I knew of nothing else. That said, for me while there were no ensuing physical wounds – the one main scar is now almost undetectable – there was latent PTSD that was left unattended which was then triggered through another traumatic experience two years back. But

that has made me even more attune to the need for duty of care of our own by our organization....it is almost unforgivable that in an international body that purports to be in the service of healing humanity, we are lagging so far behind in addressing the trauma of our own, before we can even begin to think we can ably address the trauma of the peoples we serve. We must all be a little bit more empathetic and kinder to one another because being a target as a civilian or an aid worker is not a one-time thing, the trauma continues unabated and the healing needs to be a collective one.”

Elpida Rouka is currently a Maurice R. Greenberg World Fellow at Yale University. She most recently served as Chief of Staff for Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy on Syria, and remains part of the UN’s “good offices” team to that country. She has spent the past 17 years with the UN, and returned to Iraq in 2007.

Darko Mocibob



Photo courtesy of Darko Mocibob

“My last recollection before the blast was being on the phone and talking to my colleague in the Oil-For-Food program here in NY. I was sitting with my back to the window, on the side of the explosion. I don’t personally recall the moment of the blast. Some 15 minutes later I started coming back because I lost consciousness completely at the time of attack. My colleague in NY could just hear the line being cut off with nothing else, and then less than half-hour later, the breaking news appeared on screens worldwide. As I was coming back, it may sound funny now but my first thought was what happened, did my computer explode? Because the entire room was a bit of a mess with the computer on one side, the chair on top of me, the desk was turned over with a lot of dust. I was obviously not processing the gravity of the situation. It

took quite a while to realize and I was quite dazed from the blast, and I had, which I couldn't feel at the time, injuries from the flying glass, including on my head and my shoulders. And then the rescue operation started. Rescuers started coming in, checking the offices, slowly taking us out from the building.

Given the number of the injured, there was not enough medical material – bandages in particular – so colleagues were actually tearing up bed sheets to apply first aid.

Because I was classified as “walking wounded” I was directed to an ambulance that was waiting, an Iraqi ambulance, and with a couple of other colleagues was taken to a hospital where a local doctor informed me that I had a number of cuts. At that point the doctor informed me that they would do the stitching but didn't have any anesthetics. That was probably physically the most painful memory of that day because hours after the attack I could feel the stitching without anesthetic.

Little by little I was beginning to realize the magnitude of the deaths. As I saw more colleagues, they would bring more news of this colleague, that colleague, being seriously wounded or being killed. Which psychologically was the hardest moment, learning that colleagues were not with us anymore. Of the 23 victims on the list of who perished that day, I knew personally about half of them and some for years.

Given the number of the injured, there was not enough medical material, the bandages in particular, so colleagues were actually tearing up bed sheets to apply first aid.

...The following day, following the release, we were taken back to the Canal Hotel to try to retrieve some of our property, in my case, that included passports, including the laissez-passer [UN passport]. My office at the time was on the side of the blast, it was further down on the road that the suicide bomber struck. So the office was damaged but it did not collapse. So I was actually able to retrieve, my suit jacket was still on the back of the chair. Inside there were passports but because of the flying glass, my jacket looked like someone had taken a razor and cut the back of it. For a few years, I actually kept it, and then at some point decided to let go of both the jacket and that terrible memory of it. I remember that even my pockets were full of glass.

Among us who were in Baghdad and who lived through that day, there was a different level of the psychological trauma. What helped me personally was the fact that I lived through another war, in Bosnia, in my own country, so had some experience with that. And I had some familiarity with my injuries – I'm a medical doctor by training – and the attitude, how you decide to develop your mindset after that.

There are those who do not like the UN. Who even organize such atrocities directly against the UN. But by and large in my experience, the Middle East,

and even in my own country, the population appreciates the attention and having someone who will hear their word and extend a helping hand.

... In the fields where we operate, there is often a lot of misinformation. Rumors, half-truths. Outright lies about what the UN is doing. We will never win over everybody. And in conflict situations, the emotions run high, and it's easy to get emotional. And I understand to the extent how some of the attackers felt. I was in a position to read an interview with one of the people involved in the planning of this and he was expressing no regrets. But in his mind the UN was part of the aggression against his country, that's how he saw it.

... Our job is also to interact with people. If we bunker ourselves in, we may be safe up to a point for those who want to do us harm. But we will lose even more, we will lose the trust of the people, we will be isolated and won't be hearing what they're telling us in the conflict or the immediate aftermath of a conflict.

The ones that I often think about and I've been back to Iraq often after the bombing, are our national staff. Some of them who worked with me in '97 and 2003, they still work for the UN and they've gone through difficult periods. They've taken risks and whenever I go, I set aside time to talk with the ones I've known to see how they're doing. And I do hope the UN will continue supporting them in every single way."

Darko Mocibob is the deputy director of the Middle East and West Africa Division within the UN Department of Political Affairs. His first assignment in Iraq lasted 18-months starting in 1997 as a humanitarian observer for the Oil-for-Food Programme.

Francis Mead



UN/Antonio Tibaldi

"It was one of the last times internationals could travel around Baghdad. I remember a very poor city. I remember traveling to the eastern edge of the city and its very bumpy roads and going to a clinic there and talking to somebody who was working with Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) about how difficult it was to maintain health services. I remember a lot of trash in the streets and partially flooded areas where there was no water system. You had the sense that it wasn't very safe. But actually we didn't realize quite how unsafe it was.

The day it happened I was doing a story about mines and unexploded ordnance because that was a huge issue in Iraq. There was a press conference in the Canal Hotel downstairs. I think it started at about 3:30 in the afternoon. So I was sitting in the front row listening to this press conference. We were sitting in an ordinary room. A bunch of people were there, a couple of cameras were rolling at the back of the room, and then suddenly there was an enormous crash. Everything went dark. I think it's because a lot of debris and dust passed through the room. It made everything pretty much black for two seconds.

Your brain cannot react to what's going on. And then suddenly you're looking at an ordinary room covered in dust and your brain kicks in, the adrenaline kicks in, and the first thought was that was an explosion. It sounded like it was in the building. You think – I survived the explosion. I'm still alive. And then your brain does go into survival mode. The next thought that I had was, well, what happens if we rush outside. Maybe they'll be people waiting outside for us with machine guns. I think that was the moment actually that I was most scared. I wasn't really that scared after that. There was that one moment of real fear.

Other people were dazed, covered in dust. People looked like white mummies covered in this white dust and sometimes streaked with blood. So I remember that very vividly and people just sitting dazed.

I carried water and I helped carry some stretchers. And there was an Iraqi colleague in the office who'd been hit on the head and he was dazed and I sat with him and talked to him for a while. I found things to do because after an incident like that, there's a really strong desire to help.

People responded very quickly and even as I stumbled out people had already been pulled out of the rubble, and there a little patch of grass just outside the front entrance and there were already about eight people laid out on this grass. Some of them were probably dead. And (there was) a particularly personal moment that I always feel bad about, that happened to me. I stood next to that patch of grass looking down at these people laid out there and a man was just stirring and becoming conscious and he looked up at me for a moment. And I didn't know what to do because I was really afraid of making

things worse. I regret that, because as soon as I got back from the bombing I went and did a first aid training course, to give myself more confidence, and I realized what I could have done, is just held his hand.

Later I found things to do to help. I carried water and I helped carry some stretchers. And there was an Iraqi colleague in the office who'd been hit on the head and he was dazed and I sat with him and talked to him for a while. I found things to do because after an incident like that, there's a really strong desire to help, to do something and combined with fear that you will screw things up.

We were, a couple of days later, flown out to Amman, Jordan, and the UN had provided access to counselors. I never felt angry at the people who set (off) the bomb because it didn't feel like I had very much to do with me. It was you know a symbolic and physical attack on the UN to create more chaos to make the country uncontrollable. It was actually carried out by al-Qaida in Iraq who then became ISIS.

I think people are fairly aware but it's necessary to let people know how dangerous it's become, unfortunately, to work for not just the UN but non-governmental organizations in many countries. We've now become a target. Aid workers, humanitarian workers, political UN workers – we've all become targets. The most difficult side of it obviously is that you know for an organization like the UN to be effective, they need to be able to engage directly with ordinary people. And unfortunately, that's become much more difficult.

Another very sad thing about the Iraq bombing is that there have been subsequently other major bombings of the UN and other organizations. There was a major bombing in Nigeria and there was a major bombing in Algeria. I feel terrible about that in a way because those bombings got much less publicity.

... One of the outcomes for me honestly is that I felt more connected with the UN. I was interested and committed to the UN before but the UN became more important to me after that. And that's partly because of the many remarkable people that I saw in Iraq working for the UN who are doing a fantastic job. I really respected that. "

Francis Mead is a TV producer at UN Video. He previously worked for the BBC and UN agencies, such as UNICEF. He was in 2003 working for IRIN, which at the time was affiliated with the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA). He has done a documentary and written a book about his time in Iraq.

Esam Al-Khanchi



Photo courtesy of Esam Al-Khanch

“All of a sudden it became black and dark. The day turned into a night. Hot iron pieces fell from the sky. The time slowed down, just like in the movies.”

“In the summer, power cuts were frequent in Baghdad, so I would have preferred to stay at the Canal Hotel until 5:30 or 6 pm. But on this day, August 19, I do not know why I left my job early. I was about 20 meters away from the explosion and I heard the sound of the iron gate through which we passed every day to the building flying in the air. My mind was in disbelief, and then I heard the screams of my colleagues, who were in the security office.”

Esam began his work with the United Nations in Iraq in 1999, first in the security sector, and then moved to the Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq.

He tells his story in Arabic at <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2018/08/1014102>

Secretary-General video message on 15th Anniversary of the Terrorist Attack Against the UN Mission In Iraq

Fifteen years ago, the United Nations suffered one of the darkest days in our history.

On 19 August 2003, a terrorist attack against our headquarters at the Canal Hotel in Baghdad killed 22 people and wounded many more.

We remember our cherished colleagues who lost their lives in the service of

peace, development and human rights.

Among them was our representative in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello.

I met Sergio many times, and followed closely his remarkable work in Timor-Leste. I was always impressed by the way he embodied United Nations values and our spirit of service.

Today we pay tribute to all those who died so tragically 15 years ago.

We honour their sacrifice. We will continue their mission. And we will carry forward their memory as we strive to resolve and prevent armed conflict and build a prosperous and peaceful world for all.

Thank you.