

Case #12: Iraqi Translators

One of the first things most people learn in school is not to be a tattletale. No matter how appropriate it might be to let the authorities know what is happening, everyone learns that the consequences of “telling” are severe. Such people are viewed as “collaborating with the system” and putting their own personal advancement ahead of their friends and community.

Throughout human history people seen as collaborators are, at best, ostracized; at worst they are killed. During and after World War II, women who fraternized with Nazi forces in order to survive and sustain their families were beaten, shunned, and had their heads shaved as a sign of their “guilt.” Vietnamese who worked for the U.S. government or military were the first people imprisoned, tortured or killed after the U.S. left their country.

The West lacks fluent speakers of most non-western tongues. Few westerners have any significant knowledge of history, culture, and society outside Europe and the U.S. (Even knowledge there is seldom incisive.) This is especially true in the Middle East. With hundreds of thousands of western soldiers and civilians on the ground in Iraq, Afghanistan and their surroundings, the ability to communicate reliably with natives is necessary for survival. For that reason one of the most effective ways for natives with linguistic skills to support their families has been to become translators for government, business and the military. But this employment is not without risk. As in previous conflicts, translators risk being seen as collaborating with the “occupiers” and to date more than 250 Iraqis who have worked for allied forces or western businesses have been executed, often quite brutally, by factions who oppose the U.S. presence there. Estimates suggest that a similar number of translators’ family members have suffered as well.

One of the reasons translators still work for the U.S., despite threats on their lives and those of their families is offers of political asylum from countries such as the U.S. Translators conclude they only need to hide their identities long enough to make enough money for their new lives in the States. Others identify with the stated goals of the U.S. occupation and believe that translating might help ease tensions between rival factions, paving the way for non-violent political solutions to the country’s problems—perhaps even paving the way for a Western-style democracy.

It appears, however, that western governments are not protecting those who have helped them. For instance, the U.S. State Department processes applications for refugee translators. These translators who have worked for the U.S. are given preferential treatment when the State Department considers them for immigration. Despite such preference, the process requires that the translators have already fled Iraq. Even after they have fled, the process of reviewing their applications is often very slow “for security reasons.” Moreover, many who have gone through the difficulty and cost of fleeing Iraq cannot even apply for asylum since they do not qualify as “refugees” according to the United Nations definition (which is the one the U.S. currently employs in its considerations).

Those individuals who worked with the U.S. have routinely had their applications for immigration (even as seekers of political asylum) refused by the very societies they have assisted. Justifications offered for such rejections include concern that some applicants might turn out to be sleeper agents, that the allies cannot afford to grant exceptions to their established immigration laws, or that the risks to such people are not grave. Even without outright denial, the processing of applications, which often takes many months, leads many to turn back to Iraq because the wait creates an insurmountable hurdle.