

Experiencing 'Voluntary' Evacuation

Compiled by Don Little with contributions from Basheer & Sara Abdulfadi,
Peter & Kelly Jensen and Amy & Sam (all pseudonyms)

Introduction – by Don Little

How do you choose to leave a country when it is no longer safe or wise to continue living there – in the midst of an increasingly violent civil war without an end in sight? Eight years ago I was invited to visit such a country and sought to encourage and minister to colleagues on teams in a few different cities. I was privileged to make two two-week long visits and spent much time with a number of these workers.

During these visits I got to know all three of the couples who share their pilgrimages of evacuation in this article. They are among my real-life heroes. They all learned the local languages to a remarkable degree and have poured their lives into ministry for years. Long before the current civil war began to tear this country apart, I witnessed their loving and sacrificial ministry. I also saw their years of wrestling and discouragement in terms of struggling believers and repeated failed attempts in launching house churches. Even before the civil war, this country was one of the hardest countries in which to live and minister of any country in the Arab world. There were so many powerful negative forces at work – spiritual, cultural, economic, political and geographic – that the progress of the Gospel seemed non-existent and was largely invisible for decades throughout the 20th century.

Yet, in the past decade there were increasingly positive new signs of God at work. Some networks of small house churches were gaining maturity and stability. There appeared to be greater responsiveness to some media ministries. Even now, in the midst of the civil war ravaging the country, God continues his work in these very trying times.

So, what is it like to be forced to make the decision to leave the place of ministry to which God has clearly called you, after so many years of ministering and sending down deep roots? As you read these moving accounts I ask that you pray for each couple, for the local believers and friends they left behind, and for the country which remains in such tragic turmoil. I suspect that after reading these accounts you too will see these couples as excellent examples of good and faithful servants who are great models for us all. May God grant each one of us the grace and perseverance he has given them!

Leaving as a Result of Political and Social Unrest

by Basheer and Sara Abdulfadi

Leaving our adopted country after eighteen years was not the result of a dramatic eviction, but due to increasing scrutiny and political and social unrest. The short version is that we returned to our home country in June 2013 for what we intended to be a short vacation and have not returned since.

Our ministry for the first sixteen years was primarily evangelism, discipleship and gathering with some tentative experiments in leadership development. In the early years most of our work was opportunistic evangelism (on the bus, in shops, etc.) and one-on-one evangelism or discipleship relationships. Many young people at that time were willing to study the Gospels, and Basheer studied Mark with several. He was also part of a wider effort to bring worshipping groups together, all of which fell apart after one to two years. Sara was involved in evangelism with her neighbours and helped a colleague in her discipleship of believing women.

We had returned in August of 2011 following a time in the States, near the end of Ramadan. The Arab Spring had turned into an uneasy standoff between the government and the protestors, who were protected by a powerful general and his forces. This divided the army, and there was fighting and daily protest marches in parts of the capital city shortly after the Eid. Some of the fighting involved tank fire near home and work. Economic activity nearly ceased except for the inevitable *qat* and limited food and medical care. Tribes cut the power lines and electricity was limited to zero to four hours a day, sometimes cut off completely for as much as a week. Fortunately, the situation did not, at that time, devolve into complete civil war. Under intense pressure, the long-ruling president, agreed to step down in return for immunity from prosecution. In February 2012 his vice president was appointed in an election as the interim president. The fighting stopped, but the society was more polarized than ever and religious hardliners saw an opportunity. The interim government brought many Islamic ideologues into the government and security apparatus. As a result, the scrutiny on foreign workers increased as many of the new faces in government were determined to remove Christian influence.

In March 2012 an American in a large city in the centre of the country was shot and killed in a drive-by assassination. The local government told westerners in the city that they could no longer ensure their safety and virtually all of them left over the next few weeks. Most had to travel to another city before leaving the country and we coordinated housing for those who were passing through the capital.

In October 2012 colleagues found a list of names of local believers and expatriate tentmakers, including Basheer's name, circulating on an antagonistic social media page. The name of the man killed in March was near the top of that list.

Shortly after that a refugee who knew many of the tentmakers was taken for questioning by security. We worked with a few colleagues to help his wife try to obtain his release. After six weeks he was sent to the immigration prison for deportation and we learned that he had been tortured. That led to a new round of advocacy to prevent an illegal deportation to his own country and try to find settlement for him (which eventually happened in early 2014).

Then, from December 2012 through May 2013, we cared for a Somali boy who was severely malnourished and needed a series of surgeries to enable him to swallow. Sara worked with the boy's mother and auntie, navigating doctors and the government hospitals for weeks. The stress of the boy's care also came with concern about how the Somali community would perceive the situation. That was resolved only a few short days before Sara was to return to the US for a family event.

Our youngest child began to exhibit symptoms that did not respond to normal treatment, so she travelled with Sara in early June 2014. Basheer finished up work and joined them in late June. We later realized that the symptoms were a manifestation of the chronic stress.

Back in our home country we talked through these events with the elders of our church. Their concern this time was greater, partly because the dangers changed from general to specific threats and partly because they could see the stress on our family. They knew that Basheer planned to return, but about ten days before our scheduled return, our pastor reiterated his concern. We agreed to put the question to our elders, who called for a day of fasting and prayer prior to their meeting. They unanimously agreed that we should not return.

This might seem imperious to an outsider, but our conviction is that missions is a task given to the church, and our trust in our elders' judgment was well-founded. Besides their role as our sending congregation, the elders had carefully helped us come to decisions in two previous crises, one a family crisis and the other political. They had weathered a number of political crises over our twenty years in the Middle East and had resisted pressure to 'bring us home'. They had grown relationships with the mission's US office and our pastor served on our denomination's mission board. And they prayed for us week in and week out for over twenty years.

Basheer's emotions ranged from disappointment to relief to uncertainty over what we should do. Sara's predominant emotion was relief. As she said the other day, 'I was willing to go back, but I was afraid that I would crack'. We also felt that we had left without finishing the work and had some guilt that our colleagues were soldiering on in increasingly difficult circumstances. We wondered if we had somehow been unfaithful or too timid. We had lots of dreams about the country and Basheer often felt that he was 'absent without leave'. We felt very broken and continue to work through feelings of disappointment with ourselves and with God.

One concern during the transition was financial, and we record here our gratitude to God and his people for providing all our needs. Our agency worked with us for the year, our church continued to support us and God supplied part-time work. Our small house, which we had purchased a few years prior to settle residency issues, helped a great deal. Like the Israelites of old, our clothes and shoes did not wear out. Final gifts from a concerned friend and another from our church carried us through until the day we received our first pay check from the job that God provided for Basheer in the States.

Previously we had discussed what we would do vocationally if we had to return to our home country. The viable possibilities were for Basheer to go into pastoral ministry or to continue to work professionally. I did not feel confident enough to enter a pastorate and our parents' health needs dictated location. Our desire was to find work in a nearby city to minister to the Muslim immigrant population, but no doors opened to diligent knocking. God provided work in a small town with virtually no immigrant population. In some ways the culture gap is greater than the one we faced first in the Middle East. Many times we looked up and asked, 'āmil 'ay, ya rabb?' ('What are you doing, O Lord?')

We can now laughingly say that we had written a very good script for God, but he had another. Our emotions are calmer now than the first two years back, but still we ask, 'Are we doing this right?' 'Are we investing in what is best or are we settling into comfort and complacency?'

Three years on, we begin to see some of God's purposes in renewal for us with opportunities for ministry to Muslims. It is obvious now that God was moving workers out of the country prior to the terrible war that continues. We wonder if the war is some combination of judgement and mercy – judgement for the violent deaths of twenty missionaries over the last fifteen years and preparation of hearts for the gospel. We have also had rest and medical care for conditions that seem to have been brought on by stress. On the ministry side, we occasionally have direct contact with Muslim students in other cities, but our influence is primarily in recruiting and training new missionaries. We have an open door with Christian university students who are considering working with Muslims, we serve together on our denomination's mission board and we help to mentor a team of young people who are intentionally reaching out to Muslims.

Although we are not in daily, direct contact with Muslims, we are thrilled at finding ways to engage with the work, we continue to pray for Muslim friends and colleagues and we remain open to returning to the Muslim world.

Forced to Leave

by Peter and Kelly Jansen

Peter and Kelly (pseudonyms) have served in the Middle East for more than twelve years and now serve as area leaders for their organization.

Life was good. There were challenges and problems, of course, but we enjoyed the life that we were living in the Arab city that God had led us to in a country that was largely unreached. We had community for the family, deep relationships with the local people and Peter had a good job that allowed plenty of flexibility to spend time with seekers and local believers. It was exciting to see a church beginning to emerge and the difficulties that we faced seemed to pale in comparison to the joy we found in being involved with them. This city was our home.

We didn't expect the revolution. It started small, just peaceful gatherings of citizens petitioning for reform and for the president of the last few decades to step down. But it picked up momentum and by March 2011 lines had been drawn and tensions were mounting. Some of our teammates and friends from other organizations who weren't as embedded in life there as we were made the decision to leave at that time. We chose to stay. After all, this was our home and Peter had responsibilities with the business he managed.

Besides that, it wasn't really that bad. We could easily avoid the protest camps and life was continuing as normal for the most part. But then the fighting started as a rebel tribe declared war on the provincial government with the goal of capturing different governmental offices. It began on the outskirts of the city and at first we expected that the armed forces would gain a quick victory. But the fighting steadily moved into the interior of the city.

We saw many more of our friends depart during this period. It was a stressful time as our sleep was disrupted by the sound of explosions in the distance and in the mornings we found bullets on our concrete roof. Our children learned to tell when the battle was getting too close and would come inside without being told. Still we stayed for the same reasons, knowing that we were not being targeted and could avoid (for the most part) the clashes between the opposing sides. We also wondered what sort of model we would leave with the local believers if we left at the first sign of difficulty.

After six months of violence, the president resigned and tensions diminished. It was too late, though. The government and police force were still divided and their ability to maintain security and order in our city was irreparably weakened. We saw indicators of this and encouraged our team and the 'worker' community to take precautions.

In March 2012 our lives changed forever when one of our worker colleagues was ambushed and killed by religious militants on his way to work. As the immediate shock wore off and the urgent matters had been dealt with, we realized that we had to make a decision about whether to remain in this city in light of the changed environment. We suspected at the time (and later it was confirmed) that these militants had been watching several potential targets and we were some of the ones on their list.

Despite still strongly identifying with all of the reasons why we had stayed up to this point, we realized that if we were to continue to live in our home city, we would have to change our lifestyle dramatically and it would come with a cost to our family. This was different than being a third party watching a violent dispute from a distance – we were now being targeted. So we chose to evacuate to the capital city.

I remember a feeling of numbness on the day our friend was killed as I struggled to reorient my mind to the reality of the situation. Over the days that followed I would feel adrenaline rushes at times with my heart racing and my body tense and poised for some kind of action. At other times I wondered why I felt so normal when much of my world had been turned upside down. I said goodbye to a number of dear friends who I knew I might never see again and yet I could not cry. I was numb to the sorrow of those partings.

Once I arrived in the capital city these feelings were replaced with troubled thoughts about when and if we would ever return. As we debriefed the crisis, the tears finally came and I wept deeply over the many losses that we had experienced in such a short time. The following months as we lived first with another family and then in a borrowed house, I found that my capacity and drive to handle what needed to be done each day was greatly diminished. I found it difficult living with no clear plan about the future. I envied my friends who had felt released to return to their home countries or move on to different locations and positions while I still felt the burden for this people group and country.

The evacuation was one of the most difficult things that Kelly has ever gone through. She struggled to know how to help the family deal with all the questions and emotions of the abrupt and uncertain change to our lives. The country which had been home was now filled with dangers and fears that bombarded her thoughts. Daily life was exhausting as she wrestled with the desire to be strong for the family while feeling that the outside world and her internal emotions were spiralling downward.

During this time, we tried to help our children process a situation which was difficult for them to understand. What they did know was that their friends were leaving, that everyone around them was acting different and that the life that they had known was changing. As he was packing up his room, our oldest son (age 11 at

that time) expressed these emotions through tears as he said, 'Even if we come back to this city, life will never be the same'.

It would be easy to say that we were forced to leave but we don't see it that way. We probably wouldn't have left when we did if this crisis had not occurred, but we made the decision not to endure the cost of staying.

As I was sharing the decision to evacuate with our local brothers and sisters, their response was encouraging as they pointed me to Jesus' instructions to the disciples as he was sending them out in Matthew 10:23, 'When you are persecuted in one town, flee to the next. I tell you the truth, the Son of Man will return before you have reached all the towns of Israel'.

In a tumultuous situation, *when* we decide to leave is important. But equally important to those of us who bear the name of Christ is *how* we leave and what model we give to the persecuted believers we leave behind. Are we providing an example of escaping when trouble arises or an example that there are times that we must prayerfully make the decision to move on to the next city or country and continue the work of calling the nations to Christ?

After spending several months in the capital city after the evacuation, we moved our family to our home country for a year while I made trips back and forth. We then returned to the capital city for a year and a half before relocating to a nearby country a few months before a large scale war erupted. Kelly and our children are enjoying a more stable environment and supportive community while I have accepted an organizational leadership role and continue to serve the local brothers and sisters in our former host country.

We are still healing from all of these experiences. I expect that we will always have some scars. However, we prefer not to focus on the difficulties that we went through but rather on the God who brought us through them. It was during these times that we discovered new depths of faith and saw his work among the few believers in this precious unreached people group.

Evacuation again

by Amy and Sam

As I sat on that crowded plane looking out on the partially bombed out tarmac, the thoughts of whether I would ever return to this country ran through my mind. Would I ever see the smile on little Waleed's face again, or discuss with Eman the beauty of the Psalms? Would I ever again mourn with my neighbour Miriam over the loss of a family member, or argue with Samya that my faith is valid? Would I ever share the camaraderie of living in crisis with our neighbours, reliving last night's bombing raid or laughing at the power outages and shortages of cooking gas?

If someone had told me twenty-some years ago when we first evacuated from this country that I would be doing it again, I would have laughed incredulously. But here we were once more, waiting for the air-raids to pause long enough for our plane to take off in the midst of another civil war.

We saw it coming. It was just a matter of time. So many had left before us. Political instability, kidnappings, terrorism, workers leaving or being expelled from the country, organisations leaving, embassies leaving, how long would we hold out? How long *should* we have held out? Our girls were in college now. My husband had a job in a local institution. We had tried to remain under the radar. We seemed to be in a good position for staying longer, but how long would that last?

Over the past couple of years, we had helped a few others by packing up their homes when they couldn't return to this country. Now we were leaving suddenly and someone else would have to pack up for us. Would we ever again see the eclectic furnishings that made up our home over the years?

Another Evacuation

Yes, this was different from the first evacuation many years before:

Then, we had a vulnerable one-year-old,

but this time our two daughters were safely away in college.

Then, we were escorted in military planes provided by our home country, this time we were guests of another embassy's evacuation because our embassy had already left.

Then, we left teammates behind,
this time we were the last to go.

Then, we had only been in country for less than a year and had few roots, this time the roots were so entwined in the fabric of our being that pulling them up was much more painful – it required leaving a part of ourselves behind.

Then, we were able to return after only two months,
this time...

Community Helped Us

One major difference is that this time we had community, and it was because of community that we could stay as long as we did. Fatima called me often and asked how we were doing. She would try to reassure me that everything was okay. Mahmoud, our neighbour across the street, was watching out for us. My good friend, Intisaar, was ready to take us to her village if things got really bad in the capital.

And it was because of this community that we were able to leave when we did. My friend Miriam asked us to go because she was concerned for our safety as

foreigners. Our small fellowship had dwindled down to about eight adults coming from four different countries, but we knew each other well and felt like family. A diplomat's wife who was a part of our fellowship and women's bible study called me *every day* to see if we wanted to evacuate yet. She got us on the last evacuation flight with her embassy. Another friend was at the airport in charge of getting everyone on the three planes leaving that day. His care for us was not only exhibited in making sure that we got on one of those planes, but also in the parting hug he gave Sam.

When we touched down in a small country nearby, we left the airport as one of Sam's friends was approaching. He was relocating to a nearby country. We met another local friend in the hotel we stayed in that night. He didn't yet know where he was going. We realized we were becoming a part of another community even in leaving this country – a community of refugees.

Our Children

We didn't know the significance our leaving would have on our TCK daughters who looked at this underdeveloped, violence-strewn place as their home! Both grew up here; one was born here. We didn't realize how much of an impact it would make on us and on our children once we left and had to settle in another country. We thought we were relieving our girls of the worry they had for us living in a chaotic situation, and in some ways their stress *was* reduced. But now they faced a new anxiety – where was home, what was their identity, where did they feel safe?

God's grace is evident, yet his answers aren't always obvious

We continue to process God's grace and lessons in our experience of living in and leaving a volatile place. In no way is this process complete and I'm encouraged and sobered that others who had to leave are still working out what God is teaching them through their transitions.

- **Guilt** – I think this is a big issue for many of us. We feel guilty for leaving others behind. We feel guilty for 'abandoning ship' and for not sticking it out, for treasuring our lives more than our local brothers and sisters. Of course, we can rationalize all of this and say that we as foreigners have a different situation; but in the end we still *feel* guilty.

Another part of our guilt may come from analysing (or over-analysing) whether we did enough while we were in the country of ministry. Did we use our time wisely? Did we spend enough time with our neighbours? Did we present the whole gospel to our friends? Did we show enough mercy to our brothers and sisters in Christ? Were we a consistent light in our workplace? Did we equip them adequately for the trials that lay ahead?

- **Fear** – How much did fear motivate us to leave? How much did fear motivate our actions living in a volatile area? How much do we trust God? How much can we trust others?
- **Loss** – In times like these we are told to grieve our losses. What are our losses? Home? Possessions? Relationships? Identity? How much of our identity was tied up in living in a volatile country? When people thought of us and prayed for us, did they pray for our ministry or for our protection? What does it mean in our lives now to fully have our identity in Christ?
- **Humility** – Leaving a country quickly can be humbling. We are left exposed, dependent on others, uncertain, vulnerable. Where do we go from here? Will the reminder that we are ‘jars of clay’ truly point us and others to the surpassing power that belongs to God and not to us (2 Cor. 4:7)?
- **Compassion** – Having gone through the emotional turmoil of leaving a country suddenly causes us to empathize naturally with others who have gone through the same experience. Refugees of all sorts: political or religious or even economic. Those who have their lives uprooted and have to transition to a new country. As God comforts us in our affliction, how can we best comfort others (2 Cor. 1:4)?

There are still many issues to process but God’s grace is overwhelming. He has been good to us as we transition to a new situation. He has given us new community and we are blessed. We’ve seen his mercy on our girls as they come to grasp God’s call on their lives. He continues to work in the lives of those we left behind. He is still calling a new generation of workers to bring his light into that country’s darkness, and is stirring up believers there to reach their own country with the love and peace of Christ.