

PART 2: FACTORS SHAPING OUR DECISIONS ABOUT SAFETY AND SECURITY IN VOLATILE PLACES

Reflections on Suffering and Ministry in Volatile Places

by Ivan Fawzi, with responses from three colleagues

The author, from the U.K., along with his wife and three children, works in the Middle East.

Suffering in the Arab world is part of the fabric of society. You can't escape it. Our Arab culture emphasizes it through its TV dramas, in songs that recount how life is unfair from the day you were born (especially in some traditional Iraqi songs), through the images that fill the billboards on the streets, and in the daily reality of hardships throughout the region. Injustice in its varied and multiple forms is on the lips of everyone. The phrase 'we have been hard done by' is fed to our psyche through stories and history lessons from childhood. And, as our region has not seen peace for centuries, it is continuously felt today. In Iraq, where I was born, we actually have not seen a peaceful change of authority or government for more than a millennium. Bloodshed is transition's prominent distinguishing feature and is almost expected whenever some new government or power takes over. We have a saying in Arabic: *ittafaqa al arabou an la yattafiqou*. This means 'the Arabs agreed to disagree.' However even with this amount of disagreement the one thing that unites us is the suffering experienced through the Palestinian issue. This unites not only Arabs but the worldwide *ummah* of Muslims.

Today we see the horrific atrocities impacting millions of people perpetrated by the radical Islamic armies/militia IS, Nusra, Al Shabab, Boko Haram and others. Yet despite all this, suffering for 'the cause' is a noble calling in our mindset. It is viewed with the highest honour and it's celebrated and encouraged. Even those who commit acts of terrorism choose to do what they do because in some twisted way they are 'sacrificing themselves' for their worthy and just cause.

Suffering and persevering in the face of trials and danger is not unique to Christians in their noble cause of 'following the Messiah.' In a recent seminar I was leading, some people expressed their sadness about the treatment and suffering of Christians in Iraq and Syria. I agreed, but pointed out that actually the Yezidis were in a much worse situation! Christians are at least given the option to pay the *jizya* tax since they are 'people of the book'¹, but not the Yezidis! For them the only option was convert or face death or slavery (especially women).

¹ I do recognize that this did not happen always, as there were many situations where Christians were not given any alternative. But according to Islamic teaching this is the way in which Christians should be treated.

A Christian Response to Suffering

So, as disciples of Christ living in this complicated and twisted world, when it comes to the question of suffering what should set us apart? Are we to be perceived and viewed differently than the rest of the world? How are we to respond to situations that involve suffering when people around us constantly suffer? There is no other place that scripture points us to other than the cross. There we are shown how we are to imitate and follow our God who was, is and always will be set apart because he willingly embraced the cross.

When I was a communist, my role model was a man called Salam Adel. He was the young secretary general of the Iraqi communist party back in the early sixties. When the Baath party (Saddam Hussein's party) came to power in 1963 he was arrested, brutally tortured and killed. His eyes were gauged out, his bones were crushed and his remains were thrown in an acid container to leave no trace of him. This guy was my hero! He could be described as a man 'familiar with suffering.' I was fully committed to the cause and ready and willing to totally follow in his footsteps. Why? Because he personified a *cause* that gave not only meaning to my life but set out a standard for me to emulate and to pursue. I may have been young and naïve, or just another disillusioned revolutionary, but I was committed!

The pressing question for me today is: *'What's the difference now that Jesus is my Lord?'* That is the question that faces all of us who live and serve in dangerous places and volatile situations. Is our *cause* worthy enough to put ourselves and our families at risk and to suffer for? If our answer is yes, then how committed are we and how far are we willing to go to follow the call of Christ and walk in his footsteps? Would we seriously go wherever he asks us to go and do whatever he wants? When Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him we should *expect* suffering. We are warned ahead of time (as he was) of the cost:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Mt. 5:10-12)

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. (Mk. 8:34-35)

If we are to expect this to happen in our 'normal' day-to-day walk, how much more if we step out further and go to foreign, hostile, unstable and volatile locations?

What is Your Calling?

It always disturbs me when Christians go to places (assuming that they are following a calling from God) that have issues with security but resolve ahead of time to take the first available exit if or when something goes wrong. They choose the safest and most comfortable places to live. Or they do everything to ‘protect’ themselves from exposure and jeopardize their ministry in case the truth is revealed about what they are ‘really’ doing.

When I was blacklisted from Egypt and my wife and kids had to stay behind in Cairo for ten weeks, some missionaries we knew stopped coming around to our flat, consciously keeping a distance to protect themselves in case the Egyptian security would notice them. (Indeed there was a car parked outside checking up on everyone.) Thankfully some of our friends carried on as normal. The amazing thing is that our Egyptian friends, most of whom were believers from Muslim backgrounds, rallied around the family and came to visit almost every day. They helped pack our bags and on departure day three cars full of our friends went to the airport to say goodbye.

Usually, the worst thing that could happen to workers is getting chucked out of the country (which is not nice, I know). Compare this to the implications for the local believers: exposure, harassment, intimidation, threats, interrogation, imprisonment, torture, etc. This situation fundamentally changed our perspective on security and safety. Don’t get me wrong; I am not advocating that we ought to go about and announce to everyone openly that we are missionaries coming to make disciples of Jesus Christ (although often people around us know this anyway). Nor am I saying that we need to throw ourselves in unnecessary and foolish situations that deliberately bring us persecution, hostility or danger. However, if we are serious about the location we have been called to we need to be absolutely sure that we have sorted our motives and objectives and completely thought through the risks. We have to resolve and commit to face the worst possible outcome and consequences—not only for us, but for our spouses and children—prior to boarding the plane! *We need to think and evaluate why we would want to go into such a volatile place in the first place.* Would it not be better to stay put and act upon a calling that is more appropriate for the personality that God has given me, my spouse and my children?

Unfortunately, it seems that due to the experiences local believers have had with western missionaries, their normal expectation is that the missionaries will leave as soon as any danger or instability hits the country. What message does that send? I always ask myself what people would think of me and how would they react if I came back after removing myself temporarily from the location until things ‘calmed down.’

Health and Safety

I guess we have to face the truth most of us actually do not take seriously the reality that our Christian life may require us to pay the ultimate price. We are keen and quick to go as long as we are ‘safe.’ Who among us hasn’t been subjected to the tyranny of the ‘health and safety’ idol that has swept over our western nations? The security advice that gets posted on our government websites is usually a good indication of the level of fear that exists in western cultures, especially compared with other countries. I can guarantee you at this moment that if I took it literally and followed the advice that exists regarding our current location, I would probably conclude that God has not called us to minister here. The more I consider the reasons why people decide to leave volatile locations the more I question our understanding of the calling of Christ we claim to have in going to a certain place—especially volatile ones—in the first place.

Who goes? Who stays?

But the question remains, ‘What then is a good, genuine reason for someone to consider leaving a ministry and the calling with which they have been entrusted?’ I personally think that when our hosts (i.e., a church, local organization or the community itself) tell us they no longer think it is appropriate for us to stay, we should take that seriously and considering exiting. A local friend, in discussing this issue, told me that if the locals themselves are on the move or leaving at all costs then it would be natural and expected for the foreigner to leave as well. (Although he did mention what an amazing witness they would have if they actually stayed.) It goes without saying that if your legal status changes then staying is not an option (e.g., your visa is not renewed or you have been asked to leave by the government).

Should we leave because our organization tells us to? Should we leave if the team we work with votes that we should leave? Certainly we should take this seriously and pray about it, but I do not think we should automatically submit and adhere to any decision if we are not convinced by it ourselves. In addition, we should not have disciplinary action taken against us if we do not comply. Each one of us has our unique presence, connections and circumstances that would be deeply affected if we leave because we are told to leave. Again, extreme decisions like these would not be made without involving a person’s close network of praying friends, families and churches. I am not advocating independence and isolation in making decisions. If everyone in our personal connections says we must go, we would do well to listen and leave.

Please understand where I am coming from: I am trying to get us think outside the box and push us to be real about taking God’s calling and evaluating our perspective on suffering in a much deeper and serious way. Being a non-westerner (though my wife says that I think like a westerner and speak like an Arab!) perhaps allows me to throw the ‘rules and requirements’ out the window for a second. I have

also had, since childhood, the experience of moving countries five times without any say in the matter whatsoever. This has allowed me to see that stability is a luxury, not a right or necessity. After all, the majority of the rest of the world does not have insurance policies, pensions, social security or the golden ticket (a European/North American passport) out of conflict zones. Because of my history of instability perhaps I can identify with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—tent-dwellers and strangers in foreign lands (Heb. 11:8-10; 13-16). Like them I think I am privileged to see that what matters is not the security, stability, comfort and protection this world offers (though, like anyone, I crave those things and fail again and again in letting them become my desire in this life) but to look forward to real city, the new creation whose builder and architect is God.

Increasingly the way we view security and stability in our privileged countries dictates how we evaluate volatile situations. I believe this is because it is influenced by a culture that demands comfort and avoids hardship at any cost. With the increase in terrorist activities of late, I am afraid our mission organisations have followed suit. How many times have we received emails and reports, warnings and requests to read and study materials on security and safety? How much time have we spent on taking security training/simulations on how to deal with kidnapping, escape plans, etc.? I think these are helpful, informative and even fun to do. But it has become a demand and a requirement rather than an option. I wonder what the early missionaries would think about this? What, for example, would the Apostle Paul's advice for us be? I guess we could look back on them and say how irresponsible, foolish and reckless they were to boldly go where no one dared to go!!!

The question of when to leave a volatile situation is not just for the privileged. We Arabs wrestle with it as well. It started to express itself more clearly since the beginning of the of nineties with the problems in Iraq, followed by the Arab Spring with the instability in Egypt, Yemen, Libya and other places; and now the current tragedy in Syria. In the last couple of months alone I have personally met two believers — one from Syria and one a Kurd from Iraq — who expressed to me that they would have stayed and faced the worst if the danger had not threatened their wives and children. I don't know what my immediate reaction will be when this happens to me and to my family. The fact is that these guys and millions like them had no choice in the matter: they had no choice where they were born and what nationality they have. They just found themselves in crises that forced them to make their particular decisions. We Arab Christians are not much different to westerners when it comes to risk aversion, believe me! But perhaps our threshold is a bit higher as we haven't had the same privileges afforded to many westerners. Although the situation is changing a bit, in general most people just think about how to manage the next day (literally) so planning ahead and preparing for the future is not high on the agenda.

‘Not my will but yours be done...’

So, how do we prepare ourselves in advance? What we will resolve to do to count the cost right from the beginning, since trials, persecutions and troubles will definitely come (Mk. 4:17; 2 Tim. 3:10-12)? My advice is to look to Jesus. He knew the Holy Scripture spoke of him and his work, especially that he would be betrayed, would suffer, be rejected, flogged, spat at, mocked and killed. He knew he would rise from the dead (Mark 8: 31; 10:33-34). He prepared himself for the coming hour, resolving to do the will of the Father and accomplishing his mission without wavering or second-guessing. When the moment of truth came in Gethsemane he was able to say ‘not my will, Father, but yours be done.’ Yes, Jesus is the Son of God and we are not! But he did ask his disciples to follow him, and to do the same. Each person, according to the mission assigned to them, carried it out despite all the danger, persecution and suffering they and their families faced.

Counting the cost before we embark on our dreams — fulfilling what we believe is a calling to a particular nation or country — needs more serious prayer, preparation and commitment in order to face the dangerous and often unpredictable world we live in. There is an abundance of security information and training in or organisations. Where is the training and biblical teaching on preparing believers to face, endure and maybe even pay the ultimate price (for us as well as our spouses and children!) of following Christ?

Throughout the world, now more than ever, people who follow Jesus are becoming more familiar with and accustomed to suffering. Perhaps this will tip the balance towards our readiness as Christians to suffer for Christ’s sake, rather than choosing a comfortable and life-insured faith which marks that way most of us live these days.

The communist Salam Adel mentioned above, like many others, paid a heavy price for his cause! If he had become a Christian I wonder if he would have perhaps played it a little bit safer, as many of us (including myself) do? I hope not! My prayer is that the LORD makes us more like the church in Smyrna:

These are the words of him who is the first and last, **who died and came to life again**. I know your **afflictions** and your **poverty** – yet you are rich! I know the **slander** of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. **Do not be afraid** of what **you are about to suffer**. I tell you, the devil will put **some of you in prison** to **test you**, and you **will suffer persecution for ten days**. Be **faithful, even to the point of death**, and I will **give you the crown of life**! He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. (Revelation 2:8-11)

Editor's note: in order to engage more voices on this subject we invited a few people to read and respond to Ivan's article. Their responses follow:

From CEM: 'Christine, people die.'

CEM has been in and around the Arab world for 30 years.

I was living in Egypt when I first learned that my mother was wracked with cancer. What? My mother? That happens to other people, but not us. When I unveiled my tears to an Egyptian friend, he simply said, 'Christine, people die.' As a Canadian, I was not used to death. Our family always had enough to eat and although we were not wealthy by some standards, our parents sent us to summer camps and we went on summer holidays.

As someone from the Arab world, Ivan's familiarity with suffering is alien to my experience, thus my shock at the words so casually spoken by my Egyptian friend.

At a deacons' retreat, we did a spiritual gift inventory. One of mine turned out to be martyrdom. I shared this with a colleague who said that would be helpful in my line of work. Before I spent a period in Iraq shortly after the gulf war, I consulted with close friends about the wisdom of entering a country so recently engulfed by warfare. Some mornings, I woke up in a cold sweat, thinking about my own funeral.

Ivan does outline some of our theology of suffering. He gives references about how we should view our own suffering and that of others, in light of Scriptural teaching. I have often thought about the Yazidi ladies, and what solace they have in their depraved existence as sex slaves. They have no example of a suffering Messiah to calm their wretched lives.

Ivan mentions other stakeholders in our call to be with the people and possibly suffer alongside them. This is an important point. While we are called to be with the people, can we put our children on the altar as well? Living here in Bahrain, we have visited the grave of two of Samuel Zwemer's young children, who died, ages four and seven, within a week of each other in 1902.

Ivan is aghast at the thought that foreigners would evacuate at the first sign of trouble. Evacuation in the face of on-coming trouble is a complex issue and good people differ. Sometimes the presence of foreigners endangers the lives of local men and women and it would be better for them if we did leave. Some years ago, a heightened military situation resulted in one couple evacuating from the situation while another couple stayed. People have different comfort zones and this needs to be respected.

It is important and necessary to examine our trigger points and what has to

happen before we evacuate from a location. It is better to discuss this thoroughly in the light of day ahead if time rather than in the heat of the moment and we need to respect those who differ from us.

From Mark Billage:

Mark serves as National Director of the Arab World Ministries office of Pioneers in the UK and lives in the East Midlands with his wife and occasionally his three children as they drop in from time to time.

In the short space available I cannot respond to all of Ivan's article, but, I would like to start by saying that his viewpoint is much needed as it reflects on a theology of suffering, and tackles key issues that overseas workers face living in dangerous or volatile places. I agree with Ivan that the prevalent Western attitude can seem fixated on safety rather than looking at a wider biblical mandate to take up your cross and follow Christ. Certainly before my family and I went to serve in India, it was paramount for us to think through what might happen in terms of our personal safety. It was very possible that we could lose our lives for being followers of Jesus Christ.

However, looking specifically at the issue of evacuation there are many factors involved. At first glance, the decision appears simple: Jesus has said that we may have to lay down our lives as we follow him. We suffer because He suffered. Yet from where I'm sitting, as a national director of a mobilisation gateway, I must balance the tension between individual and collective risk to the organisation. The other side of this debate sits with the responsibilities placed on an organisation that exists within a Western context of law, and charity governance which places the duty of care on trustees. As a sending base, we take seriously the duty of care that we have towards all our members. We also seek to obey Scripture's call to respect and adhere to laws as part of our witness in the world (Rom. 13:1-2; 1Pet 2:13-17).

Ivan states 'Increasingly the way we view security and stability in our privileged countries dictates how we evaluate volatile situations.' Whilst being a valid observation, it is not the full picture. An organisation has *to prove* that they are being 'responsible employers'. In a situation where there is a clear, visible and persistent threat to life then all those involved in member care should be consulted, at field, sending church and national office level, to find a way forward that is not knee-jerk or 'disciplinary' but considered and appropriate.

I would affirm that Ivan has the right to say they intend to stay put even if in imminent danger, and commend his willingness to serve Christ regardless of the cost. But it would be difficult to endorse such an action if the field, sending church and national office all disagreed with him out of a duty of care towards him and his family. The clash of individual and organisational approach, could in some extreme situations lead to a review of relationship, but only as a last resort. In my experience,

we have accommodated as much as possible and instead agreed routes and timings of evacuation, even quite last minute in the case of one member. We try wherever possible to have a balanced approach to this issue and seek to find in every scenario the Lord's grace and wisdom for all concerned.

From AM:

AM and his wife work in the Arabian Peninsula.

Thank you for this challenge. I note that the exhortation from Revelation chapter 2 is addressed to church members. It may help us face these ultimate questions if we are sent out by churches who also take seriously the challenge of the Lord's words to Smyrna.

As we consider 'the worst possible outcome and consequences ...for our spouses ...' we should bear in mind the Rumanian pastor I heard speak. He felt so vulnerable to pressure from the communist authorities, as they would simply threaten what was most dear to him, including his wife. He spoke of how liberating it was for the two of them to solemnly covenant together to give up each other to the Lord, to entrust each other to Christ. And to tell each other that they would be faithful to the Lord whatever the threat, and leave the other in the Lord's care. Perhaps this should be part of our pre-field training?

And our leaders should continue to emphasize the reality of martyrdom. We can note the sacrifice of those 120 years ago who deliberately went into danger, e.g. in Morocco, following the death of a member, a replacement arrived on the Monday; he was murdered five days later. And others have laid down their lives in our generation too.

Interestingly, the security trainer on a course last year commented that Christian workers show a different attitude to danger – i.e., a greater reluctance to leave. But we should recognise that we will always be viewed differently by local people where we minister. They know we have access to resources that they do not have. We will always be straddling the two worlds of our sending and receiving communities and experience that tension. All the more reason to keep a clear view of the cross, as we daily seek to know the Lord's will.