



To Be a Friend Is Fatal: The Fight to Save the Iraqis America Left Behind

Kirk W. Johnson

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The stunning memoir of “one of the few genuine heroes of America’s war in Iraq” (Dexter Filkins), a rare glimpse into the perspective of the Iraqi people, and a searching exploration of America’s moral obligations to those Iraqis who stepped forward to help.

In January 2005 Kirk Johnson, then twenty-four, arrived in Baghdad as USAID’s only Arabic-speaking American employee. Despite his opposition to the war, Johnson felt called to civic duty and wanted to help rebuild Iraq.

Appointed as USAID’s first reconstruction coordinator in Fallujah, he traversed the city’s IED-strewn streets, working alongside idealistic Iraqi translators—young men and women sick of Saddam, filled with Hollywood slang, and enchanted by the idea of a peaceful, democratic Iraq. It was not to be. As sectarian violence escalated, Iraqis employed by the US coalition found themselves subject to a campaign of kidnapping, torture, and assassination.

On his first brief vacation, Johnson, swept into what doctors later described as a “fugue state,” crawled onto the ledge outside his hotel window and plunged off. He would spend the next year in an abyss of depression, surgery, and PTSD—crushed by having failed in Iraq.

One day, Johnson received an email from an Iraqi friend, Yaghdan: *People are trying to kill me and I need your help.* After being identified by a militiaman, Yaghdan had emerged from his house to find the severed head of a dog and a death threat. That email launched Johnson’s now seven-year mission to get help from the US government for Yaghdan and thousands of abandoned Iraqis like him. The List Project has helped more than 1,500 Iraqis find refuge in America. *To Be a Friend Is Fatal* is Kirk W. Johnson’s unforgettable portrait of the human rubble of war and his efforts to redeem a shameful chapter of American history.

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