

the voice of the martyrs

# i am n

*Inspiring Stories of Christians  
Facing Islamic Extremists*



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*transforming lives together*

## *Introduction*

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# The Story behind the Stories

*“I am n.” What does that mean?*

When militants from the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) moved into northern Iraq, they began identifying Christian-owned property. Families would find the Arabic letter ن (*nun, noon*), or *n*, painted on their homes and churches. This single letter conveyed the powerful accusation that the occupants were “Nazarenes,” people who followed Jesus of Nazareth rather than Islam.

To be labeled “n” in a community dominated by Muslim extremists is to undergo an immediate identity and life change. With this mark comes the ultimatum: If you convert to Islam or pay the tax, you can keep your material possessions and remain in this community. If not, leave or you will die.

Any person who takes a stand for Jesus in occupied Iraq, any person who chooses to be “n,” pays a high cost. Without warning, some Christians are dragged from their homes and businesses by armed militants—and they are never seen again. Pastors who share the message of Jesus in their communities are beheaded in front of their families. Children who will not renounce Jesus are shot. Teenagers may be taken from their homes and families and forced into service

to ISIS or beaten, mutilated, and left for dead. Other atrocities are so horrific we will not describe them here.

Since 2003, such persecution has forced more than a million Iraqi Christians, who refuse to renounce Jesus and the Bible, to flee. Many survivors live in refugee camps, trusting God daily for their food, shelter, and safety because they have no money, no work options, and no other place to go. Even more challenging is the reality that their situation is not temporary; their life circumstances on this earth are unlikely to improve—ever.

Yet their courageous, steadfast commitment to God in the face of persecution provides Jesus followers all over the world with a powerful picture of what being “n” is all about. They willingly sacrifice everything they have in this world in order to fulfill God’s calling to obey and serve him. Like the heroes of the faith whose stories we read in the Bible and in the record of church history, they are living out Paul’s words in Philippians 1:21: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

## Stories That Must Be Shared

This book was written in order to share the stories of Christians—from Nigeria to Malaysia to Pakistan—who have suffered persecution from Muslim extremists. As you read these stories, please understand that this book is not intended to encourage any hatred toward Muslims. Rather, we join our persecuted family in loving Muslims and working to see them come to Christ.

We want you to have the opportunity to get to know some of the persecuted Jesus followers who live in hostile communities and nations. Their stories matter because they are our brothers and sisters

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in the global family of Jesus Christ and they need us to stand with them. We, in turn, need their example of faithfulness in the face of persecution to encourage us in our walk with the Lord (Hebrews 12:1–2). Their sacrifices are a powerful testimony to our loving God, whose grace reaches out to save every sinner and empowers those who receive Jesus as Savior and Lord to live in faithful service to him.

It won't be easy to read these stories. Knowing that these true accounts of actual incidents happened to real people is unsettling. Some incidents are troubling at the least; others are truly horrifying. For every one of these stories, there are hundreds more that will never make the evening news or a Twitter feed.

We are sharing these stories through eyewitness accounts and interviews. They are not historical composites based on hearsay; they are current and real, having taken place between 2001 and 2015. We have eaten meals with these brothers and sisters in Christ, prayed with them, and helped to meet some of their needs. Although these narratives are true to actual events, some dialogue and descriptions are based on reasonable consideration of time, place, and circumstance. For obvious reasons, we use pseudonyms and may not mention specific locations or other particulars. Given the constraints of sharing stories such as these, this is the most accurate, complete, and realistic book we can offer about these modern-day witnesses for Christ.

## Stories That Provoke Response

We share these firsthand stories so you will come to know your brothers and sisters who are being persecuted for their Christian faith. We invite you to look deeply into their eyes and allow yourself to share

in their experience of faith as they live it out in their world. It may feel uncomfortable to do so. It may be tempting to look away, as we tend to do when we encounter the panhandler at the bus station or the homeless person holding up a cardboard sign at the traffic light. But if that person were a family member, a brother or sister, would we still look away? Or would we be drawn to embrace and help that person who faces great difficulties?

Our goal is not to elicit pity for persecuted Jesus followers in hostile Muslim countries. That is not why we share their stories. Our motive is simply to describe their experiences so you will stand with them. So you will pray for them. So they will know that they are not alone in their efforts to share the love of Jesus when doing so gets them—or their loved ones—beaten, tortured, or killed.

Our desire is for Christians around the world to recognize these persecuted followers of Jesus as their brothers and sisters in the family of God and to embrace them in that intimate unity: “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (Hebrews 13:3).

As we get to know these persecuted followers of Jesus, we discover that they are not “super Christians” who have somehow attained a higher level of godliness. They are people just like us. They feel deep anguish when their children are taken away, their husbands are killed, their sons are attacked, their wives are raped, and their daughters are forced into sexual slavery. They face uncertainty and fear when they are kicked out of their families, lose their jobs, and are cast out of their communities because they follow Jesus.

To thrive while enduring such suffering, they pray for courage, faith, and endurance. They tenaciously cling to the Word of God,

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trusting in the loving, faithful character of God and the certainty of heaven. Having lost everything of value in this world, they learn to trust that God is in control no matter what.

As our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ walk this path, they begin to see their circumstances through God's eternal perspective. That perspective changes everything. It leads them to view themselves not primarily as the persecuted but as those who serve on the front lines as God accomplishes his purposes in the midst of evil and chaos. They don't focus their attention on their small minority; they focus on the majority of people who are reachable for Christ. Their eyes are open to see that ISIS or other Muslim extremists are not thwarting God's eternal plan.

The world is not just one big chaotic mess. God is at work powerfully and strategically. The very suffering of our persecuted brothers and sisters is creating a deep hunger for the truth of Jesus among many moderate Muslims who express deep hurt, regret, and even anger concerning the atrocities in Iraq. Some even say, "We've read the Quran and know that Muhammad himself committed such atrocities. Now we want to learn about Christianity—about Jesus, about the Bible. Please tell us more."

Seizing the opportunity, these precious followers of Jesus boldly proclaim, "I am n." Counting the cost, they stand firm, faithfully sharing the message of God's grace to a world that desperately needs him. How can we let them stand alone or suffer in silence? Will we let their stories deepen our commitment to Christ and his Great Commission? Will we say, "Count on me. I am n too"?

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# The Day ISIS Arrived in Mosul

**Abu Fadi**

**Iraq**

The June 2014 day broke like almost any other day in Mosul, Iraq: hot and dusty and teeming with people, traffic, and trade. People flocked to marketplaces in Iraq's second-largest city (population 660,000). Horns honked amid the pent-up traffic. As the day progressed, the din of street-side chatter rose appreciably. By noon, it sounded like a cacophony of blackbirds chattering among themselves.

That's when Abu Fadi, a sixty-five-year-old Mosul native living just miles from the city, received the phone call that changed everything. For some, the phone call marked the beginning of the end of life as they knew it—and in some cases their very lives.

"Abu," said a friend in Arabic, "ISIS is coming. We have heard from someone we trust. Today is the day."

For weeks the rumor mill had been churning that self-proclaimed ISIS terrorists who had been ravaging cities elsewhere in Iraq would take Mosul next. That's where Abu's mother, Sara, and sister, Dleen, still lived. As Christians, they would be in grave danger. ISIS hated

many people in the world, but especially Christians. The ultimatum to followers of Jesus? Convert to Islam, pay an outlandishly high tax, leave, or be killed.

“How can we hope to get my mother and sister out?” asked Abu. Both women were disabled and in wheelchairs.

“It will not be easy,” his friend stated. “And if Mosul falls, can your city be far behind? We must pray very hard, Abu. We must—”

*Baroom.*

An ISIS military water tanker, rigged with explosives, blew up near the Mosul Hotel, where government security officers were stationed. Abu’s friend hung up the phone. Chaos descended on Mosul.

Armored vehicles rumbled down streets. ISIS troops began freeing the first of what would be about one thousand prisoners. Gunfire broke out. A woman who had planned to celebrate this day as her wedding day died in a blast.

ISIS fighters ripped down the cross on the Syriac Orthodox cathedral of Mar (meaning “saint” or “martyr”) Afram. They replaced the cross with loudspeakers proclaiming that Islam, not Jesus, was the way.

Everywhere chaos reigned. People dragged possessions to cars. Traffic jams closed roads. Screams of panic echoed. Amid it all, Abu received sporadic phone reports from his friend in Mosul, who at one point said, “The Iraqi army is now fleeing the city.”

During the following weeks, Abu secured permission from an ISIS judge to permit his mother and sister to stay in Mosul. A few weeks after taking Mosul, ISIS swept into Abu’s city, just as he had feared. More Christians hastily packed and fled, but Abu and his wife, Rukia, could not leave Sara and Dleen in Mosul.

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For sixteen days, ISIS occupied the area where Abu lived—sixteen days that to Abu seemed like sixteen years.

“Please come get me, Abu,” pleaded his mother during yet another phone call from Mosul. “It is not safe here. You must—”

A man’s hardened voice cut in on the line. “Let me state it more clearly,” the ISIS soldier declared. “If you do not come get these two infidel dogs, they will either be converted to Islam with guns at their heads or thrown onto the street.”

Abu had no chance to get his mother that day because he’d be going against the surge of frantic people escaping the city. Both women were allowed to stay with a Muslim neighbor for the night, but the ISIS soldier confiscated their house, pulled a can of spray paint from a bag, and tagged the front of the house with ن—an Arabic *n* for “Nazarene”—*Christians live here. Property of the Islamic State.*

Unable to go to his mother and sister, Abu arranged for a Muslim friend to drive the women to him. Once they arrived, Abu and the women could flee from there. Like almost forty thousand others who fled the purge in Mosul and the surrounding area, they crammed the few possessions they could fit into the car and headed east for relative safety in the city of Erbil, sixty miles away.

Soon Abu and his family arrived at the first checkpoint. Cars weighed down to their struts with people and their possessions inched forward in dozens of lines. Exhaust stained the air. ISIS guards stood with firearms and swords. Abu had prayed about this moment—for courage to stand for his beliefs.

“Who are you?” a guard asked.

“We are Christians leaving Mosul, because we are not permitted to stay in this Muslim land,” Abu replied.

The guard, now joined by others, refused to let the family pass. Instead, they placed a call to superiors. Thirty minutes later, two shiny SUVs arrived. Young men brandishing new, expensive firearms stepped out and began peppering the family with questions.

Abu answered honestly: “Yes, we are Christians.”

“Leaving is no longer an option for you and the rest of your infidel family,” said the leader. “Convert to Islam or be killed. It is that simple. It is an easy choice, no?”

Abu pleaded with the men to let his family proceed. He referred to passages in the Quran that allow Christians to live if they pay the *jizya* (Islamic tax). For ninety agonizing minutes, the discussion continued, as if a bomb were ticking and destined to go off any second. As they talked, an ISIS fighter wielding a sword circled Abu, ready to strike if he tried to run.

“Enough,” declared the leader. He grabbed Abu by the arm and led him away as his wife, mother, and sister wept, pleaded, and prayed. “Prepare to die,” he said, pushing Abu to his knees. “Last chance. Will you convert to Islam?”

Abu looked back to the three women, then heavenward. He prayed for strength, wisdom, and courage. Even though he felt weak and expected the sword to plunge into him at any moment, he sensed God’s peace strengthening him. “No, I will not be a Muslim,” he stated. “I do *not* denounce Jesus.”

The man raised his sword. Abu bowed his head, closed his eyes, and prayed. Then he heard another vehicle arrive and exhaled. Another black SUV. Out came another ISIS official, who inquired about the situation and then walked over to Abu.

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“I have a message for you to deliver to your church leaders as you leave our land,” he said. “We are victorious. And we will follow you Christians all over the world. We will reach the Vatican and convert the pope to Islam if we have to.”

Abu didn't know what to say but reminded himself not to utter anything disrespectful toward the Muslims. *Simply be honest*, he told himself. “We wish no harm on your people,” he said. “Only to practice our faith as we please.”

The official looked at him and spit. “Get out of here, you dogs,” he said, turning and walking away.

At a second checkpoint, ISIS soldiers again detained the family. They called officials at the first checkpoint and were instructed to check the car for valuables. Abu surrendered all he had. When a guard found money that Abu's wife had hidden beneath a seat, he ordered the family out of the car.

“If you convert,” said one guard, “all that we took from you will be given back. You will even be protected. So, tell us you embrace Islam.”

“I am a Christian,” said Abu.

As before, a long round of verbal volleys ensued. Each time the ISIS guard asked Abu to convert, and each time Abu politely but firmly said he was a Christian and would not.

Finally, another guard—a supervisor—came from the booth and fired questions at Abu. *This man*, Abu thought, *is different from the rest, almost like an actor playing a part but deep down not that character himself.*

“So, you have left behind a home and would be willing to pay the tax?” the supervisor asked.

Abu nodded. Yes, the previous checkpoint had taken substantial money that could be used for the tax. And yes, they did own a house.

The supervisor instructed the interrogating guard to make a call. After the guard left, the supervisor turned to Abu. “Begone,” he said. “Fast.”

Abu felt like a fish that had been hooked and fighting for its life when suddenly the fisherman cut the line. He nodded his thanks and returned to the car.

Upon reaching Erbil, they saw that the city was already overpopulated with Syrian war refugees. Because of the ISIS purge in Iraq, the city was expanding even more each day. What did most of these refugees have in common? They were Christians whose lives had been pulled out from underneath them. Students who had been ready to graduate from the University of Mosul now had no records to show they had even been enrolled. Young people engaged to be married now didn’t even know where their fiancées were. Adults who had jobs now were jobless.

They sacrificed it all. They left behind their homes, the lives they had lived, and their hopes for the future, choosing instead to trust in God and serve him wherever he would lead.

The conditions in Erbil were miserable. Nauseating smells rose from garbage and raw sewage. People curled up beneath makeshift tents made of blankets, towels, or scrap materials—anything to protect them from the relentless sun and oppressive heat. They searched desperately for water and food.

Amid all this, Abu set up a lean-to tarp for his family. “Now,” he said quietly, “we thank God for a safe journey.” And they bowed their heads to pray.

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As Abu and his family did, we must remember that the God we serve is with us wherever we go. We must place our hope in him, not in a place or circumstances.

God is far less concerned about where we live than where our hearts are. He cares most about where we place our trust, what we value, and whether the desire of our hearts is to focus our eyes on him. He is pleased when we are so focused on him that we, as the writer of Hebrews did, can affirm our hope and trust with these words: “But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city” (11:16).