

Everyone Has a Story

Varoosh Muradian's fingers glide over the 28 Arabic characters of his keyboard as he translates the sentences to English under his breath, the words slipping past his lips as quickly as his fingers can type them. English isn't his first language, but neither were the other three.

"I just learned the languages by practicing them with native speakers," Muradian waves away the idea that school as a viable option for language learning with his hand. "I don't really believe in education. I know that's funny, because I'm here, but I've just had so many experiences with no degree in my hand, just a high school diploma."

While Muradian has attended plenty of school in his twenty five years, the Iraqi schooling system plays no part in his linguistic skills as he has acquired an impressive fluency in Arabic, Armenian, Kurdish, Syrian and most recently, English; which is what landed him a job chaperoning the British Broadcasting Corporation to the front lines of the most dangerous territory in the Middle East.

"No Iraqi wanted to take that job," Muradian pauses, "Also, no one else could speak Syrian."

In February of 2016, four bulletproof jeep loads of BBC journalists put their monolingual trust in Muradian skills as their sole translator to lead them to the front lines of Syria and Kurdistan, where chaos ensued without interruption for two weeks.

"Every single night we got very little sleep...or none at all," Muradian recalls. "We couldn't sleep outside because of the bombing. The bombs were about five miles away on any given night, so we slept in the car where the windows were tinted and the entire car was bullet proof. That's the only place we felt safe, and even then, we were awake all night because we were scared. We were all scared. I was scared."

Kurdistan, a region that encompasses parts of Iraq, Iran, Syria and eastern Turkey and boasts a population of anywhere between 25 and 35 million Kurds, is situated on the Western Iraqi border, where their history is comprised of a series of wars and rebellions against the neighboring Iraqi government.

"The Kurdish people are in arguments with the Iraqi government and the Syrians are resisting ISIS, so there is bombing on all sides," Muradian accounts for decades of unrest in one simple statement.

What a twenty-three-year-old Erbil native was doing in the middle of Kurdish and Syrian wargrounds was not an impulsive decision for money, nor was it a deathwish. Muradian was volunteered by his father.

“I used to work for the U.S. government in Iraq, and so I am invited to go to the conferences they hold for the UN in Erbil,” Muradian said. “I have sat in plenty of conferences before, where they discuss what’s going on in the Middle East, and there’s so many opportunities there to network with people from all over the world, and so that’s where I heard about the opportunity to be the translator for the BBC job. Actually, my dad heard about it and he thought it would be a good opportunity to earn some money. The job paid really well.”

The BBC hired Muradian not only based on his former work as a translator for the U.S. government, but on his abilities to speak both Kurdish and Syrian-languages that aren’t common amongst even Iraqi politicians.

“There was a large group of journalists that just wanted to go to the borders of Kurdistan and Syria to take notes for their records,” Muradian speaks with a slight distaste for his former fellow British roadtrippers. “They just come into our country and want to see what’s going on, but they only want to portray it how it already is on the news-bad. They never say anything good that’s going on in the Middle East, which you can find, you just have to keep your eyes open.”