

Scholar lost in desert of despair guided by beacon of hope to oasis

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By [Matthew Reisz](#)

Matthew Reisz meets a refugee academic given new life, just like the one saved by *THE* readers' support



Safe and sound: thanks to the Scholar Rescue Fund, Dr Baker has been able to put down fresh roots in Manchester

The terrible costs of persecution faced by academics across the world are thrown into sharp relief by the story of Nouri Baker.

Dr Baker is Iraqi - his surname is an Anglicised version of a similar-sounding Arabic name - and works as a researcher investigating plant-parasitic nematodes (roundworms), a major agricultural pest.

Having obtained an MSc and a PhD at the University of Reading, he returned home in 1983, found work with the Council of Science and then a post at the University of Baghdad as a lecturer in plant protection.

He combined his position with agricultural consultancy at a time, he said, when "everybody was struggling to live and my monthly salary couldn't even buy a tray of eggs".

As a Shia Muslim, Dr Baker had long been aware of inequalities in Iraq, yet the period after the Anglo-American invasion of the country in 2003 was notable for increased violence and "a much more sectarian atmosphere".

His high-profile role as director of student accommodation employing 400 staff attracted both abuse and death threats. A particularly nasty email in 2005, sent to the president of his university, led to his being transferred to another department, but also, unfortunately, to a job as director of a media centre set up by the US forces.

Although he soon got into arguments with his new "employers", notably over whether to print an election poster saying "Vote to kick out the Americans", many reviled him as a US agent.

By 2006, the death threats and attacks on colleagues had convinced Dr Baker that it was time to leave Iraq - and he was waiting only for his 22-year-old son Ali to finish his exams before doing so.

On 6 June, he had a premonition that something was wrong and asked his driver to change their usual route to work. Before they arrived, he got a call from his daughter saying that Ali had been murdered while waiting in a car as his nine-year-old brother went into a shop to buy bread.

Although he said he had "considered [him]self dead" ever since his son was killed - most likely by a sectarian gang "just because he was called 'Ali'" - Dr Baker also knew that he had to "try to stay alive for the sake of the family".

In February 2007, he managed to take his wife and four surviving children to Jordan. He was able to continue his research as a scientific visitor, first at the University of Jordan and then with the Ministry of Agriculture. The only problem was that the posts were unpaid.

It was then that the New York-based Scholar Rescue Fund threw him a lifeline. Since 2002, said Jim Miller, the SRF's executive director, the fund has provided fellowships and other support for more than 450 scholars and found academic homes for them at 282 universities in 40 countries.

SRF funding allowed Dr Baker to complete a major report for the Jordanian ministry. In the meantime, he learned that he and his family had been granted permission to move to the US or the UK. He is now continuing his research as a scientific visitor at the University of Manchester.

The generosity of *Times Higher Education* readers when the SRF was the magazine's Charity of the Year in 2011 provided just enough money to enable the fund to save another academic, described by Mr Miller as a "threatened senior scholar now safely teaching and researching at an exemplary UK university".

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• <http://scholarrescuefund.org>