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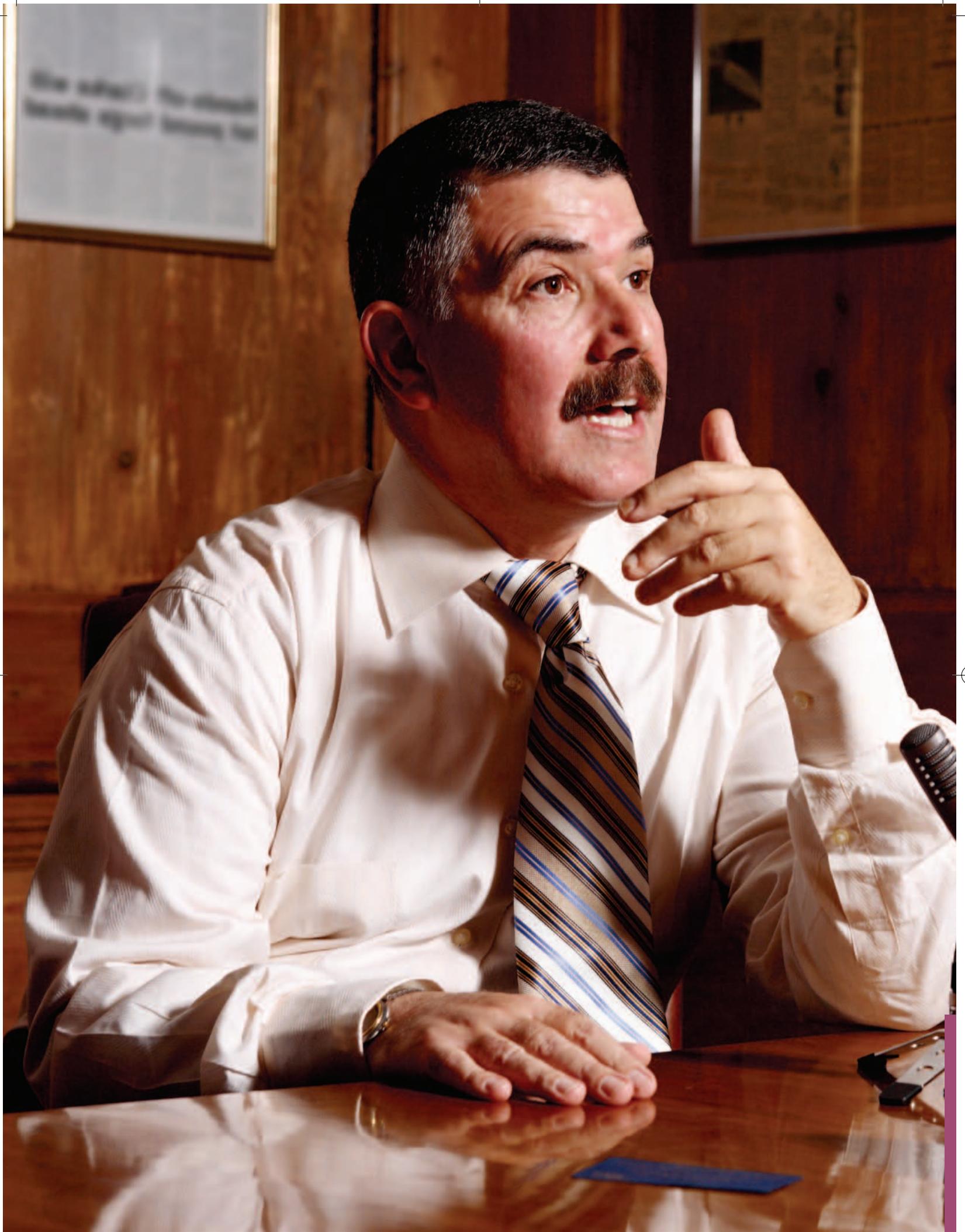
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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

“ I RECEIVED THREATS FROM AN ARMED GROUP TO STOP THE BUSINESS. THEY CAPTURED MY TEAM IN A CITY WEST OF BAGHDAD ”

**MUNQITH DAGHIR,
IRAQI OPINION POLLSTER**



“OF COURSE I WAS SCARED. BUT I REALLY BELIEVE THAT I AM DOING THE RIGHT THING”

IN A RARE INTERVIEW, MUNQITH DAGHIR TALKS TO **ROXANNE ESCOBALES** ABOUT THE DANGERS OF POLLING IN IRAQ AND THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING A PEACEFUL FUTURE

The week before coalition forces entered Iraq in March 2003, Munqith Dagher heard little of market research or public opinion polls. “We were moving from house to house trying to avoid the bombs,” he said. “Because I didn’t have anything to do but listen to bombs and the news, I tried to read some old books in my library, and by chance there was one about public opinion surveys. I decided that if I got a chance to do research I would do it.”

As well as teaching Dagher the fundamentals of market research, that book started the former public administration academic on the path to becoming a leading Iraqi pollster.

In under three years he has run over 100 surveys for the UN, international NGOs, foreign governments, ad agencies, the media and FMCG companies. He has also carried out research on behalf of UK-based research agency ORB for almost a year now, looking at public attitudes towards topical issues and is about to explore attitudes towards tobacco.

Dagher started his business with two partners and a volunteer workforce. He now runs the Independent Institute for Administration and Civil Society Studies, with 40 full-time employees and 350 interviewers throughout Iraq.

He has not talked to the media in almost a year. Here, he grants *Research* a rare insight into his life, and the dangers of polling in Iraq. ▶

cover story



After the invasion, there were just two voices talking in Iraq. The first voice was the occupying forces who were saying, "We came to liberate Iraq, and to protect Iraqis from the past regime." The other voice was of the exiles who also said that they came to help, and that they represented the true Iraqis.

We knew that neither voice was really representing Iraqis. Now we had an obligation: if we really wanted to oppose what was happening, we should have our voice heard all over the world. I decided to start the business, and I met my two friends, who became my two partners. I remember that date: it was the 16th of April 2003.

When I told them that I wanted to conduct a public opinion survey they asked me, "What do you mean by public opinion surveys?" They were professors in the university but they didn't know what I meant. Of course, in the universities we did many surveys, but with a sample of 20 or 30 people – and for academic research.

They told me, "You are crazy. You want us to go to people's houses, knock on their doors, telling them: 'I am a researcher, and I want to conduct an interview with your sister, or your mother, or with your father'? It is a crazy thing. How could you think about it?"

I said "Let us try it. We will not lose anything, let us try it."

NEW BEGINNINGS

At that time I hadn't much money. All of our savings in the bank had been looted. We hadn't received the payment for most of the government projects we had done. So we were mostly bankrupt.

I sold my car, and my partners sold things to fund this project. And 14 of my students on masters and PhD degree courses agreed to work with me for free. My daughter and my son worked as data punchers. I used my



"SECURITY FORCES...ASKED TO ACCOMPANY OUR INTERVIEWERS TO THE HOUSES, JUST TO BE CONFIDENT THAT WE WERE NOT HARMING OR HARRASSING PEOPLE. OF COURSE, THIS WAS JUST AN EXCUSE"

own computer with a generator.

We started like a family business, in a big room with my son, my daughter, my partner's son, my partner's daughter, working together with our students. I told them how to code the questionnaire, how to enter the data. After two weeks I started the fieldwork.

THE FIRST POLL

Just one day before I started the fieldwork, Mr [Paul] Bremer [chief administrator of Iraq] announced three decisions which changed the life of Iraqis; the first decision was about dissolving the army, the second was the de-Baathification Act, and the third, was the dissolving of the information ministry.

So I designed a five or six question questionnaire asking about how Iraqis viewed the invasion forces, the exiled parties and about the three decisions that had been made by Mr Bremer. Then I launched that to the field.

It was the first ever poll in the history of Iraq. The sample was 1,100, just in Baghdad. The problem was that during Saddam's regime no one could have any data on the population of Iraq. We had a census, but no one could see it. So how could I draw my sample?

To do it, [I looked at the information] from my previous research on population of Baghdad neighbourhoods.

I knew that Baghdad is distributed into nine different areas, and how many citizens lived in each one. But to tell the truth, I didn't know anything about the real random systematic sample. We did it randomly by going to any house we wanted to go to. So it wasn't a perfect sample.

OMNIBUS NEWS

Munqith Dagher is putting the finishing touches to a new omnibus service that will track consumer opinions in the war-torn country, beginning in January next year. Dagher is working in partnership with the Opinion Research Business (ORB). The omnibus will interview a nationally representative sample of 1,500 Iraqis.

Now, I have access to the census, and it is more accurate. It took about ten days to finish the fieldwork and another ten days to enter the data and analyse it.

I went to all the media channels that I knew, and said that I had a poll that I wished to publish, but that I wanted them to pay for it – at that time the poll cost me about \$1,000, which is a very large amount of money, all our savings. Everyone said that they would publish it, but for free. I didn't take that.

At this stage I contacted one of the Iraqi politicians who had been in exile. He was a sociologist with a degree from the UK. I told him that I had results of a poll and I thought it was worth trying to market it to the world, and to establish a centre for strategic studies. He refused the first time, but after less than a week he contacted me and said, 'OK, bring your poll'. He gave me \$1,200. Most of it went to the interviewers, a gift for their efforts.

We released the information and it was like a bomb, really like a bomb. It featured on Fox News. After this he asked me to do a second poll, which he funded. After we released the second poll to the press, two American researchers met me and asked about the scientific procedures that I followed in my poll.

They said "You said many bad things about the forces, how could you be that sure from your information? Just show us the procedures that you used." I said that I did this and that, and I used that formula for the sampling.

They said it was not perfect but that it was better than they expected. They trained us for three weeks. They taught me everything about polls. After that second poll, I started

professional polling work – this is about two months after I started.

ASKING THE QUESTIONS

Recruiting interviewers was not a very difficult procedure, because with the high rate of unemployment in Iraq, especially among the educated people, it is very easy to get what you need – 95% of interviewers have a university degree. About half of my workforce are women. We need women. It is a cultural matter in Iraq that it is very hard for males to interview females. So you need female interviewers on your team. Each team is composed of two interviewers, one male and the other female.

And because of the security situation in Iraq, a household master may hesitate or think many times before agreeing to let anyone enter his house. So seeing a female in our team gives him more confidence that they will not harm him. I now have a real challenge; keeping the quality of my work as high as I can, and the reality of working in Iraq.

THE EXTERNAL PRESSURES

We faced problems in a northern Iraqi province. Our project manager called me and said security forces in that province asked to accompany our interviewers to the houses, just to be confident that we were not harming or harrasing people. Of course, this was just an excuse. I knew that they wanted to know what we were doing and they wanted to watch people, to discover how they talked to us. So he said to me "I have either to let them accompany our interviewers, or we stop the project and you lose about \$10,000. What is the decision?" I said, "Stop it and we'll lose the \$10,000."

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Everyone in Iraq looks at our work from his own point of view. The Government sees my work as something which benefits terrorism, because people frankly say that they dislike the Government. The insurgents believe that I am spying and trying to collect information to help the invasion or occupying forces.

FEAR OF ATTACK

I received threats from an armed group to stop the business. They captured my team in a city west of Baghdad and took six men. The team leader was my cousin. After torturing them, by beating them very heavily for four days, they checked everything; they checked the questionnaires; they said to them "Well, we didn't find anything wrong in the questionnaire, any question that may threaten us or may be used by foreigners against us, but nevertheless we still have suspicions that you may help the current Government. So take this message to your boss," they said to my cousin, "Tell your cousin to stop the work, and we will keep watching you." I stopped working in that city. Even now I don't work there.

Also I changed my office. I thought for a while about stopping the business and took my family to Amman for about two weeks and then sent them back to Iraq.

I stayed in Amman and gave it more deep thought and decided to get back to work. My wife and I have to check on our children after each lesson during the school day. We phone them five or six times a day just to be satisfied that they are safe.

I hired a guard and a driver, and I built the guard a small room inside the garden, because if people notice



"EVERYDAY I GO TO MY OFFICE IN BAGHDAD, AND I TAKE A DIFFERENT ROUTE. I GO IN AT DIFFERENT TIMES... I CAN'T SHOW ANYTHING THAT COULD DRAW ATTENTION TO MYSELF."

that you have a guard, that means either that you are very wealthy or that you are one of the politicians who are very hated in Iraq, so you will receive threats.

Everyday I go to my office in Baghdad, and I take a different route. I go in at different times and I can't buy a good car, I can't show anything that could draw attention to myself. I stopped all interviews in Iraq with any TV channels and newspapers, to not show myself in the media or draw attention or suspicion.

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

Of course I was scared. But I really believe that I am doing the right thing because telling the whole world what is happening in Iraq is a very, very important thing.

I keep reminding myself that the first goal for me when I established this business was to help my people, and this is really what's keeping me working in this business. I keep telling my friends that Gandhi is my symbol. He dismissed the occupying forces without using any bullets. I

keep convincing myself that I am doing the right thing, and I do not really believe in violence, despite the fact that I really want all these forces to leave, and my country to be free. I also believe that economics is the main motivating power for people. Whether in social life or politics, that is what we need, we need a real healthy economy in Iraq. If I help in building a real Iraq economy and an open-market economy, I will help a lot in bringing happiness to my people.



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