



WAIT BUT WHY

From Muhammad to ISIS: Iraq's Full Story



By Tim Urban

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If you're not sure what *Odd Things in Odd Places* is and why I was in Iraq by myself, [here's why](#).

On the morning of Saturday, August 2nd, I got in a taxi in Erbil, the regional capital of Kurdish Iraq, and asked the driver to take me to the Khazir refugee camp.

This was a scary-ish thing to do.

The “scary” part is a result of the fact that the Khazir camp is outside of the borders of the somewhat autonomous Kurdish region, one of the only secure parts of the country.

The “ish” part comes from the fact that the Khazir camp, though outside of Kurdish borders, is still in an area currently controlled by the Peshmerga—the Kurdish army.

Iraq has been a scary place for a while now, for a number of reasons, but it's currently *scary* in italics because of the terrorist group we've all gotten to know about in the past three months—ISIS.



So, the cab driver, myself, and our two constricted assholes headed west towards Khazir.

After about 45 minutes, we crossed **the checkpoint** that meant we were leaving the Kurdish region, and a few minutes later, right when my phone's **blue dot** was starting to get *just* close enough to Mosul for my liking, I looked out the car's right window and saw the camp:



We pulled in, spent a bunch of time convincing the camp officials and ourselves that I was a journalist, and eventually I was allowed in.

I didn't have a plan, exactly, so I started walking through the long lines of tents, noting that the 118°F (48°C) temperature I had been suffering through all week must be almost lethal here, where the only escape was in a tent.



After a few minutes, I met a man named Kamil who spoke some English, and he invited me into his family's tent. After talking with him a bit, I learned that it was actually a few families' tent, and that there were 12 people living in it—five adults and seven children. There was electricity enough for a TV and a fan, and most of the mattresses were stacked on the side.



He told me that 12 people to a tent was common at the camp, and mentioned that his tent was actually about to move to 13, gesturing toward one of the women living there who was thoroughly pregnant.

Kamil was from Mosul, like everyone at the camp. Mosul is Iraq's second largest city, only 30 miles west of the camp—and as of June 9th, an ISIS stronghold. After taking over, one of the first orders of business for ISIS was rounding up government workers for execution. Kamil, a police officer, was lucky to get out with his family before they got to him. When I asked him if he thought he'd return to Mosul at some point, he shook his head and said, "*Fuck Mosul.*"

As soon as he learned that I was going to be writing about my time in Iraq, he led me out of the tent to join him on a special Oh Okay Then I Want to Show You Exactly How Upsetting Everything Here Is So You Can Write About It and Tell Everyone Tour.

He walked me past the communal tap for drinking water, and said people used that water to clean themselves too, having not seen a shower since they arrived.



He showed me multiple babies that had been born at the camp.



We popped into a bunch of different tents, one whose fan had been stolen (remember that it's 118°), and another that had 15 people living in it. He showed me where the shared toilets drain out into a system that flows openly through the camp. He told me that a lot of the families didn't have enough food and that people were getting sick more and more often and remaining

untreated. And these were all people who two months earlier were living their normal lives in their normal homes. Remember the time I complained about anything? That was dumb.

When Kamil introduced me to a man whose two brothers had been executed by ISIS, I assumed that had to be the tour's horrifying grand finale, but he wasn't done yet. He brought me into another tent where he introduced me to a woman living there, explaining to her that I was his new writer friend. Without missing a beat, she handed me these:



Whatever I was holding, it was something bad, and I didn't want to ask what it was. I asked. He pointed across the tent to a little boy and explained that I was holding part of his *skull*.

The boy was an eight-year-old named Mohammad. Their family's house had been bombed in the middle of the night during the first days of the ISIS takeover and subsequent Iraqi government airstrikes. I never learned why or if they were specifically targeted. But the end result was that this healthy little eight-year-old—