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The astonishing journey of surgeon Munjed Al Muderis

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He refused a decree by Saddam Hussein to amputate the ears of Iraqi draft evaders, and wound up on a rickety boat to Australia. Now Dr Munjed Al Muderis is a pioneering surgeon giving amputees the ability to walk.

The junior surgeon is sitting on a toilet in the women's locker room, hunched forward, his eyes fixed firmly on the brown tiled floor. He's desperately trying to stop panic from overwhelming him by taking deep breaths, mopping his brow, clenching his eyes. If they find him here, he'll almost certainly be taken away and shot.

It's been the longest five hours of his life, huddled here alone, the deathly silence punctuated only by the odd moment of sheer terror when two or more nurses enter from the adjoining operating theatre to wash up, their panicky, hushed tones betraying what they've been forced to do to the young men lying on their operating tables. Mercifully, no one notices the toilet cubicle in the corner of the change room, its indicator permanently switched to red. Not so much as a whimper can be heard from the soundproof operating theatre only metres away, but the young doctor can picture what it must look like by now. A cauldron of blood.

For Dr Munjed Al Muderis, this hazy day in late October 1999 had begun in as routine a way as they come, with the 27-year-old doing his usual 6.30am round of the wards of Baghdad's Saddam Hussein Medical Centre before the daily meeting of surgeons and registrars to discuss new admissions. While this sprawling hospital on the banks of the Tigris River was suffering terribly as a result of the draconian UN trade embargo imposed on the Saddam regime, which meant a chronic shortage of basic medicines and equipment, the staff still managed to tend to the sick and dying.

"I come from a war-torn region where people regularly lost limbs": Dr Munjed Al Muderis. TIM BAUER

Suddenly, at around 8.30 that morning, a swarm of soldiers had stormed into the hospital, led by a powerfully built man bristling with aggression - a senior army officer - who demanded that elective surgery for the day be cancelled in all 10 operating theatres. Three bus loads of army deserters and draft dodgers had arrived and each was to have one of his ears partly amputated, by order of Saddam himself, he declared.

A wretched, ragtag bunch, some still in their pyjamas after being dragged out of their beds, others already bloody and beaten in dirty sandals, were then frogmarched into the admissions area on level 2 and ordered to lie down on the trolleys, ready to be wheeled into the theatres. Muderis was astonished that most of the men appeared calm, perhaps from sheer relief the amputation would at least be performed under anaesthetic, rather than with the cold blade of an army knife.

After the head of surgery had loudly objected to disfiguring these men, citing the Hippocratic oath, he was promptly dragged outside by a group of soldiers. Minutes later, the sound of a single gunshot pierced the air above the concrete car park. "If anyone else shares his view, step forward," the captain threatened. Muderis's eyes darted about, scanning the faces of the anaesthetists, doctors and surgical staff around him, all frozen in terror.

Muderis knew he couldn't go through with this - doctors are trained to heal, not maim or kill - but there was no way to get past the soldiers. And so, while everyone was distracted, he had slipped into the women's locker room through an entrance behind him, shut the cubicle door, sat down on the toilet - and desperately tried to figure out what to do next.

Sitting here now, hours later, what's running through his head is the day Saddam's henchmen came for his next-door neighbour, a draft evader. He remembers the screams of the young man's mother as he was hauled out of their house in his white underpants; the loudspeaker on top of the ruling Ba'ath Party truck imploring locals to come and witness his execution by firing squad; his father being forced to pay for the bullets that killed him. Muderis's mind then flashes back to his elite high school in Baghdad, where his fellow students had included Saddam's sons Qusay and Uday, teenage thugs who would speed about the grounds in their souped-up cars, before later graduating to rape, torture and murder on an epic scale. Then there was Saddam's nephew Omar, who would sit next to him in class, an arrogant, ignorant little prick.

It's now 2pm, the daily closing time for surgery, and a group of women enter the change room for a final wash-up, their ghastly handiwork now complete. Muderis waits another 15 minutes after the last one leaves before nudging open the cubicle door, crossing to the male locker room and shedding his surgical gown for civvies. The hospital's corridors, crawling with soldiers only hours before, are now quiet; to avoid suspicion, Muderis resists the temptation to run to the nearest exit. He steps outside into the pale autumn sunlight and strides directly to the taxi rank.

It's too risky to take his car, which can be easily followed, and he can't go home, because military intelligence may already be there, asking his mother about his whereabouts, so he gives the taxi driver an address on the edge of town, the home of a trusted family friend. Muderis is now a fugitive, and not even his aristocratic pedigree - he is the only child of one of Iraq's most noble families, with a lineage dating back to the prophet Muhammad - will protect him from the Ba'ath Party's wrath. From the back of the taxi, he takes one last look back at the hospital; he's wanted to be a surgeon since he was a teenager and saw Arnold Schwarzenegger's cybernetic limbs in *The Terminator*. Now all his dreams seem to be turning to dust.

This much is certain: he has to leave Iraq. But beyond that, he has no idea of the ordeals to come. He doesn't know that within weeks he'll be the only doctor aboard a rickety boat jammed with 150 asylum seekers sailing towards Christmas Island, tending to three women in the late stages of pregnancy, while other passengers vomit and piss over one another from seasickness.

From there he'll wind up at the Curtin Detention Centre in Western Australia's Kimberley, where he'll be stripped of his name and assigned a number - 982 - and where he'll act as an intermediary between protesting detainees and the guards, only to find it festering into a game of Russian roulette, with him being falsely accused of inciting a break-out. And he certainly doesn't know that for the first time in his life he will feel like giving up, after being thrown into Curtin's punishment unit. "Welcome to The Hotel," a guard will laugh.

Theatrical tendencies: Munjed as a teenager in Iraq.
COURTESY OF ALLEN & UNWIN

Camp inequality: The Curtin Detention Centre, where Muderis stayed when he first arrived in Australia.
GHASSAN NAKHOUL

Muderis's tortuous odyssey will end on the eve of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, outside the Curtin Detention Centre, waiting for a bus, squinting into the blazing sun. From this modest start he will go on to become one of the country's most respected orthopaedic surgeons, one who will give Australian and British soldiers who've lost legs to improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Afghanistan and Iraq the ability to walk again, pioneering a technology that enables other amputees, such as accident victims, to lead more mobile lives.

But all this is still ahead of him. For now, he's enduring a clattering bus ride across a beige, desolate landscape to the Jordanian border, having secured fake papers from his cousin, an army officer with contacts in the passport office. He has $22,000 in cash taped to his stomach, handed to him by his mother, who tearfully farewelled him in a final clandestine meeting. Doctors are forbidden from leaving Iraq, so Munjed Al Muderis, junior surgeon, is now Munjed, handyman.

But at the immigration counter in the dusty border town of Trebil, Muderis realises to his horror that one of the passport officers is a former patient - a man whose badly gashed hand he'd stitched up late one night only six weeks earlier. "Well, I'm screwed now," he says to himself, stepping up to face the man.

No mean feat: Patient Mitchell Grant exercises his prosthetic leg. COURTESY OF ALLEN & UNWIN

"Get off me! Get down, Mozart!" Dr Munjed Al Muderis, a slim man with quick, intelligent eyes and a Harry Potter-like face behind rimless glasses, picks up the black miniature poodle springing about on the grey sofa and plants it firmly back on the floor. Sporting a crisp white shirt, charcoal trousers and shiny black shoes, he's sitting with his back to a dress circle view of the great steel arc of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, through floor-to-ceiling sliding glass doors. But his thoughts aren't here, in the chic apartment the 41-year-old shares with his wife and infant daughter. Instead they're back in a decaying six-storey hotel in a bay suburb north of Jakarta, back in November 1999, when he and around a thousand other asylum seekers were waiting for a boat to make the treacherous crossing to Christmas Island.

Muderis had wound up in this crammed, mouldy Indonesian hotel after escaping across the Jordanian border (the passport officer, blind drunk on the night Muderis stitched him up, obligingly stamped his papers without a flicker of recognition) and a week later he was boarding a flight to Malaysia, where he hoped to find work as a doctor. But in Kuala Lumpur, Muderis met up with a people smuggler, and after another flight to Jakarta found himself paying $2000 for a boat trip to Christmas Island.

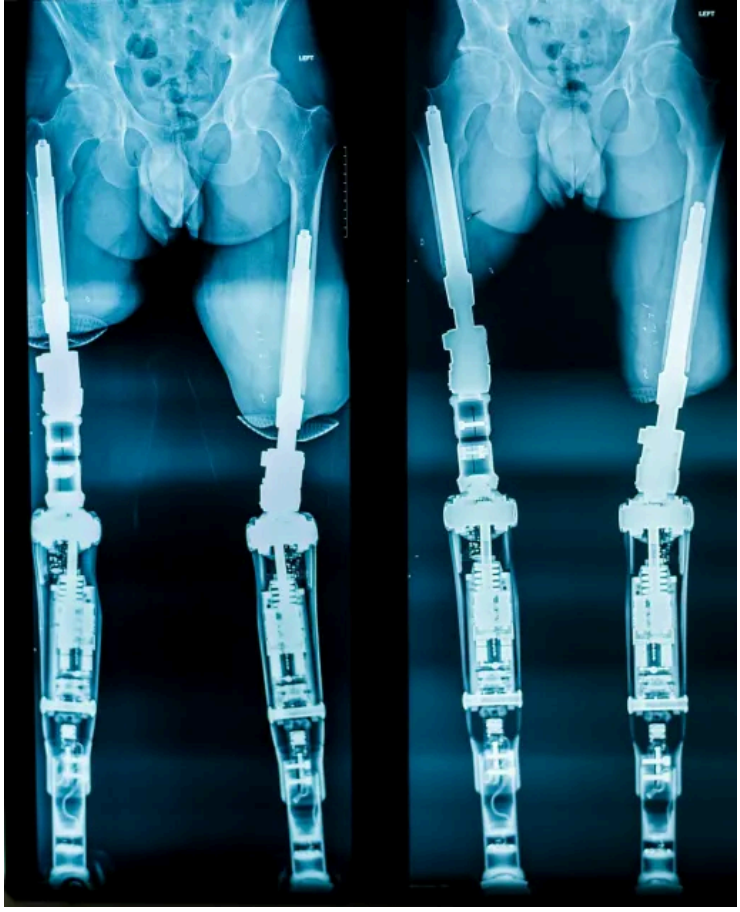
"While I was staying at that hotel in Jakarta, I began thinking that I'd made a big mistake," he narrates. Most of the hotel guests were young Iranian men who, between hiring prostitutes and going to nightclubs, betrayed toxic attitudes towards Western women, or Muslim women who adopted Western dress. One burly 20-something scornfully described how he would like to dip his hands in grease and wipe it over the face and hair of a nearby woman wearing make-up and fashionable clothes - a refugee from Iraq called Doha, whom Muderis would go on to marry. Another, with a curl of his lip, labelled all uncovered women prostitutes.

Then there was the little matter of the Indonesian people smugglers. One of them was driving a Jeep and his boss a new Mercedes, and there were police loitering outside the hotel, two security guys armed with automatic weapons guarding the boat they were due to leave in, and what seemed to be a naval frigate to escort them to international waters. "The smugglers appeared to be acting freely," he says with a wry smile.

While they were all boarding the old fishing boat, with its flaky blue paintwork and single toilet (just a hole in the deck), Muderis felt like clobbering a fiery-eyed mullah who demanded that all unveiled women

disembark, insisting such unchaste women would cause the craft to sink (he was finally persuaded to let them stay). Like any slice of humanity, the people on this boat amounted to the "good, the bad and the ugly", as Muderis describes it. "Everybody who gets on a leaky boat is taking a huge gamble - they're putting their life on the line. I didn't see much evidence of so-called 'economic migrants'. One young Iranian couple had been arrested for cohabiting - sex outside marriage is punishable by a prison sentence - and there were a few homosexuals, who probably would have been executed if they'd stayed at home."

After 36 harrowing hours, they made it to the rocky shores of Christmas Island. There they were rescued by the Australian Federal Police, whom Muderis can't praise highly enough for their kindness during their five-day stay. Indeed, the detention facilities on Christmas Island were a tropical paradise compared to the hell hole of Curtin, a series of a low-slung buildings sprawling across the red dirt of the Kimberley. It was here that, upon arrival, he was issued the number 982, written in permanent marker pen on his wrist and shoulder. "I suspect the centre was trying to deprive us of everything, including our names, to encourage us to go back to where we came from," he says.



Behind the scenes: X-rays demonstrating osseointegration. TIM BAUER

While he believes some form of detention is necessary - "It's important until a medical examination and criminal checks are done" - Muderis insists that indefinite detention is a cruel waiting game that can harden the hearts of the detainees against Australia. "Those who are not strong enough will probably go on to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, with the risk that they will never become productive citizens."

Even today, the sight of a wire-mesh fence gives Muderis a wave of anxiety. Surely his ordeals in Iraq and the detention centre, where he stayed for nine months, exacted a mental toll? "I'm a fighter," he replies. "There was only one point when I felt like giving up, when I was stuck in 'The Hotel' at Curtin and I saw people who had lied about their backgrounds get processed first."

Within two months of being released in 2000, after sending out more than 100 resumes, Muderis was working as a medical practitioner at Mildura Base Hospital. A year later he was at the Austin Hospital in Melbourne. "I received Centrelink payments for two months before becoming an Australian taxpayer," he says proudly. "There's this argument that I'm the exception, but that's completely false. Out of 1252 people who were with me in Curtin, 13 were doctors - and 12 of those are now practising as specialists in Australia."

While it was grimly satisfying to see Saddam Hussein get his comeuppance after the US-led invasion in 2003, it blew the lid off Iraq's sectarian tinderbox, unleashing religious fanaticism. "By trampling on the Sunnis who once formed the professional classes of Iraq," he explains, "a void was created that was filled by the Shiite mullahs and others with little education or experience."

A country long ruled by the gun rather than the vote, Iraq was always going to be a herculean challenge to democratise, but US president George W. Bush's "freedom agenda" now looks recklessly naive. In a radio interview at the time, Muderis gave conditional support to the US-led invasion, as long as a secular government was installed and no one religious group was allowed to dominate. It was an opinion that drew the ire of zealots in Australia, who sent death threats. "I received a note saying that just because I was in Australia, it didn't mean I was out of harm's way.

"What's often forgotten about Saddam was that he was a socialist, not a fundamentalist. He feared religious extremists most of all, and had sermons in mosques taped to monitor imams preaching extremism. If you walked down a Baghdad street with a beard like that," adds Muderis, pointing to my chin, "you'd be taken away, interviewed and probably arrested."

To stifle increasing discontent after the failed venture in Kuwait, however, Saddam started applying Islamic-style penalties to lawbreakers such as draft evaders. "In Saddam's mind, cutting off a draft evader's ear under anaesthetic was much more humane than just slicing them off with a knife, which was completely ironic because he was still disfiguring them."
Muderis pauses for a moment for a sip of water. "It's difficult for me to say this, but I now think that Iraq and the region would have been better off had Saddam stayed in power. At least Iraq would have remained secular and relatively united, and with economic stability, living standards may have improved. But the problem for Iraq is that it's caught between two religiously extreme countries: the Shiite fundamentalists of Iran and the Sunni fundamentalists of Saudi Arabia."

In his biography, *Walking Free*, there is a picture of Muderis as a goofy teenager in the 1980s, clutching a ghetto blaster and skateboard. This is a time he prefers to remember: when Baghdad was a colourful, cosmopolitan city with vibrant cafes, bars and nightclubs. Sadly, over 30 years, the colour has drained from a capital now clothed in black and white, driven by joyless social restrictions and sectarian conflict. "My two best friends in school were a Jew and a Christian; I didn't understand what religion they were at the time because nobody cared. At university, of the six women who were part of my social group, only one wore the veil."

But the increasing enforcement of the veil is the least of it, now that the Islamic State (IS) has made advances across much of northern and western Iraq, driving hundreds of thousands from their homes with a vicious vendetta of religious and ethnic cleansing. Whole communities of Christians who'd lived in Iraq for thousands of years have fled. "If I'm correct," says Muderis, "around 10 per cent of the Iraq population when I was growing up were Christians. That's about two million, which has dropped to less than 500,000 since the end of Saddam."

Although raised a Sunni, he now describes himself as agnostic: "I'm not against religion personally, I'm just against people who use it as a means of gaining political power." In outlook, Muderis was deeply influenced by his father, who belonged to one of Iraq's traditional ruling families during the days of the monarchy, and whose own father was head of the Sunni faith across large swathes of Iraq. "My dad, who was 65 when I was born, taught me the power of logic: questioning religious dogma that could be manipulated to harm people or create bigotry. He was particularly opposed to the insanity of suicide bombing."

On the day of our chat at Muderis's apartment, disturbing reports come through that IS is slaughtering Christian men and abducting and raping their wives, sisters and daughters in the captured northern Iraqi city of Mosul. "One of my fellow orthopaedic surgeons is an Iraqi Christian and he was telling me his aunt was forced to leave her house. She was given an ultimatum: convert to Islam, pay a huge amount of money in tax, or leave."

The US, he says, has made two big blunders: invading Iraq, then leaving too early. "Now each side is demanding revenge for their dead comrades; it's a vicious circle of violence." The march of IS, he adds, is just the latest chapter in a centuries-long battle over which sect dominates Islam, Shiite or Sunni. The 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War cost more than half a million lives, and Ayatollah Khomeini sent Iranian boys as young as 12 into battle, convincing their families they'd be martyrs. "It's almost impossible to beat brainwashing like this. That's why IS will win. They're contained in the region for now, but pose a grave threat to the West."

At one point during our interview, Muderis's Russian-born wife Irina, a GP with a thriving practice on Sydney's lower north shore, walks in and introduces herself. The couple have a five-year-old daughter, Sophia, and have been together since 2006. Muderis has three other children: two sons, Adam, 12, and Dean, 10, by Doha, the Iraqi woman he met on the boat to Christmas Island and later married, and a grown-up son, now living in California, with a woman he was briefly married to in Baghdad when he was

in his early 20s. He sees his younger boys every weekend and is trying to build a bridge to his eldest son, Ahmed, "but we don't know one another, basically". His mother passed away three months ago after migrating to Australia in the early 2000s. "She lived to see me become a successful surgeon, but in her eyes I never amounted to the success of my father and uncles," he says, smiling.

At Muderis's clinic at the Norwest Private Hospital in Bella Vista, in north-west Sydney, three amputees are sharing stories about life since their operations. They've undergone a procedure called osseointegration - a titanium rod is inserted into their femur, into which a prosthesis seamlessly clicks, giving them a greater range of movement, and far less discomfort, than a traditional "socket" prosthesis. One young woman, Miranda Cashin, who was born without a tibia in her right leg, is tearfully describing how the operation has radically changed her life. After years of struggling with a socket prosthesis, and falling back on crutches and a wheelchair to get about painlessly, Miranda now goes on five-kilometre walks.

Thanks to Muderis's pioneering work on prosthetics, and patents on titanium devices he has designed, Australia is now at the forefront of osseointegration technology. "What makes me do this," he says, "is that I came from a war-torn region where people regularly lost limbs. For some, this is worse than dying, because it changes their lives so fundamentally; there's the fear of being dependent on others. Eight of our patients, after being on Centrelink payments for years, are now working full-time and paying tax."

He's up at 6.30 every morning and doesn't get home before 10pm most nights, surviving on two litres of Coke a day and salad wraps. Although he has three medical practices in Sydney and lectures at Notre Dame University, he "makes himself available and gets back to you fast", says patient Kelvin Cook, who lost his leg in a motorcycle accident. "He's inspirational."
Inspirational but, mercifully, not perfect. On a hospital visit, Muderis betrays his impatience with staff when a patient is not properly prepared for surgery. But he appears to be liked and respected by all around him, from hospital orderlies up. The whole experience of escaping Iraq and staying in the detention centre brought him down to earth, he reflects. "I was a brat growing up, a child of privilege, and terribly spoiled. I am who I am because of what I've been through."

He admits to occasional moments when sadness about his birth country rolls over him like a black sea. "A whole generation of kids have spent their entire childhoods in a war zone. The only loud noise my kids hear are the New Year's fireworks - and that's the way I want to keep it. I'm an Australian now. Iraq for me is a place of the past, a treasured part of my childhood, but one that's gone forever."

Walking Free **by Munjed Al Muderis (Allen & Unwin) is out next week.**