

# The Ground Truth

## The Power of Peacebuilding: An Interview with Hero Anwar Brzw

Hero Anwar Brzw saw her father taken away at the age of nine. She lived through Saddam Hussein's reign of terror and the Kurdish struggle for autonomy. EPIC talked with Hero about her struggle to transcend the suffering, fear and hatred that she experienced in Saddam's Iraq, and her personal belief in community-driven peacebuilding and development as the best means for ending conflict in today's Iraq.

**epic:** What was it like growing up in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq? Tell us about your hometown.

Hero: Sulaymaniyah is one of the most beautiful cities in Iraq. There are mountains and rivers. In the summer it's very hot and in the winter it snows. The people in Sulaymaniyah are open-minded and highly educated. Most go to universities and earn degrees. They believe in freedom and they believe in fighting for their rights. I grew up with all of these ideas around me. It has had an impact on how I think and what I believe.

**epic:** What was it like living under the government of Saddam Hussein?

Hero: As Kurds, we suffered discrimination under Saddam's regime. We were underfed; we didn't feel secure. From my birth in 1971 until the uprising in 1991, I didn't feel secure. Before I even went to school I knew there was discrimination. My dad owned a small bookstore but he wasn't allowed to stock Kurdish-language books. I still learned how to read Kurdish at a very young age.

I asked my father, "Why this discrimination?" He explained it was because of the regime. We are Kurds, the regime is Arab, and the regime does not believe in equality. I was only a child, but I felt it and I understood.

As I grew older, I also felt the discrimination between rich and poor and between men and women. As a young girl in a working family, the discrimination felt overwhelming at times. As in other societies, the struggle for equal rights for all is a very real and ongoing challenge in Iraq.

**epic:** Was your father ever targeted by the regime?

Hero: Yes. He was often harassed by the regime for owning a book shop. Apparently dictatorships are very threatened by books. Then in 1980, my dad was arrested by the regime. I was only nine years old. My father was imprisoned for two years and four months. His seat at the dinner table was empty for all of that time, and we feared for his life every day.



Hero Anwar Brzw grew up in Sulaymaniyah, a city in northern Iraq. During her formative years in the 1980s, Saddam Hussein launched a brutal campaign against Iraq's Kurds. Then, following the 1991 Gulf War and subsequent uprising, northern Iraq was freed of the regime and took steps toward autonomous self-governance. In 1992, Hero received a degree in civil engineering and went to work for a local public works office of the newly elected Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). From 1997 to 2007, she worked with REACH, an Iraqi NGO that implements peacebuilding and development projects in vulnerable communities. Today, Hero is pursuing her master in Conflict Transformation Program at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University.

During the first three months of his imprisonment, we were allowed to see him once a month. It took a huge amount of paperwork, but seeing him alive meant everything to us. Then it stopped. For two years, we weren't allowed to see him at all. We didn't even know where he was, in which city, in which prison. We had no way of knowing if he was still alive.

Can you imagine? It was not until he was released in July 1982 that I knew I still had a dad.

For conventional criminals - murderers, thieves, and so forth - there were regular procedures. Compared to political prisoners, they were treated very well. But political prisoners such as my father weren't arrested; they were kidnapped. You could be working in your office or school or anywhere and a group of people would just

come and take you without notifying your family. Most of the time, you didn't know what you were charged with. The regime would decide.

**epic: Where did they take your father?**

Hero: They took my father to Abu Ghraib.

Sometimes he was in a small room, but it wasn't big enough for him to lie down - just one square meter. Sometimes an authority came out, read most of the names, and they were all killed that same day. The authorities forced prisoners into large holes and covered them with earth until they suffocated.

Being a political prisoner was pretty much the end. In ninety-nine percent of the cases they were arrested by mistake or by suspicion, so they didn't have anything to confess. But they were tortured, and some created stories just for respite from the torture. Many more people were arrested because the prisoners told names of their friends or family members, or whomever they thought of at the last moment. They just said names.

My dad was lucky. He built relations with the guards. They were Sunni and we are Sunni, whereas most of the prisoners were Shia. So my dad tried to befriend the guards and they put his name on the list to be released.

Two days before my father arrived back in Sulaymaniyah, someone came to our home and told my mom he was coming. We just didn't believe we could be so lucky; it was a one in a million chance. Nobody expected he would be released, so it was like winning the lottery. Much better, in fact!

It was very nice. I hugged him. I noticed he couldn't see very well because he wasn't allowed to see sunlight for two years. They let him outside for a little while before he came back to us, but his eyes were very sensitive and he couldn't open them well. He looked very tired.

To conceal poor prison conditions, his jailors let him wash and gave him good food during his final two days of captivity, but he was unhealthy and in a bad psychological state. He was angrier. I heard his stories and suddenly felt like I knew more about the regime, about torture and the abuse of human rights. There was no reason for that.

**epic: What was it like in the 1980s for your family?**

Hero: The war with Iran started in 1980, the year my dad was arrested. It was another excuse for the regime to kill people. Saddam Hussein used it very cleverly: He had already begun to destroy Kurdish villages in 1975 and in 1980 he started to expand these operations. He started with the border, then each year he moved in a little farther. By 1988, there was not a single village left in Kurdistan. More than 4,500 villages were destroyed and only the big cities were left.

Some of the displaced villagers came to Sulaymaniyah. They had to leave everything behind and often didn't have jobs or skills to work. Many families were missing loved ones. They would arrive in the city despairing and angry, yet couldn't say anything for fear of being arrested. Many disappeared or were killed within a year.

In Sulaymaniyah, we saw more laws and restrictions imposed upon us with each passing year. We watched violence and the military presence escalate. In 1988, Saddam Hussein arrested and executed many people in my neighborhood. I was 17 and in the last year of high school.

In all, as many as 180,000 people disappeared during Operation Anfal. That's what Saddam's regime called their genocidal campaign against the Kurdish people of Iraq.

**epic: What happened during the 1991 Gulf War?**

Hero: It was a relief. Can you believe we felt that? We actually hoped that Saddam would decide to stay in Kuwait so that international forces would have to come to Iraq. It wasn't a great solution, but we thought if they came to help Kuwait that would have helped us.

After years of al-Anfal, we were desperate and alone. Of all of the countries that now talk about human rights, none were there to defend us when we were being rounded up and killed by the tens of thousands.

**epic: Tell us what happened in the aftermath of the Gulf War. How did people respond?**

Hero: It was in March when we began to hear rumors of a popular uprising. Every day, the radio stayed on longer and we listened. It was the 5th of March in one city, 6th in another, and 7th in my city. It was unbelievable. After

"...if someone had told me ten years ago that one day I would argue for aid to Arabs who occupied our lands, I wouldn't have believed it. To bring people together and find ways of living side-by-side: this is the way to build Iraq's future."

the Peshmerga, the armed Kurdish defense force, liberated part of Kirkuk, the regime forces occupied the land again. The Peshmerga were in retreat people started to leave the city.

In the past we did nothing and the regime killed many people, but this time we did something wrong: we were with the Peshmerga. We fed them, sang for them, welcomed them, joined them. We were all criminals. We thought Saddam Hussein would use chemical weapons on the city to kill us all. By late March, 90% of the people left.

We moved to the border. It was very rainy those spring months. Some people died because of the rain and cold. Some died because they were hungry; some didn't have enough medicine and care. I had two brothers, one less than 2 years old. He asked for water all the time but in some places the water wasn't clean. He got sick for a while and forgot some words, but he survived.

My family went by car but some walked. My uncles had a truck and we rode in the back with the children on our laps. They tried to cover it with a tarp but we still got wet. We survived because of that truck.

**epic: How long did you spend in the mountains?**

Hero: We spent about 2 weeks, some people spent more. We were in Penjwin, on the border, close to Iran. We didn't want to enter Iran because we thought we might not be able to come back. The Iranian government was against Kurds as well. They pretended to help the Kurdish people just for the media, but actually they benefited from our crisis. They received aid from international agencies and they didn't distribute all of it; some money later appeared on the black market.

Iran still claims it helped us during that crisis, but they killed people during food distribution. They fired into the crowds. If you believe in humanitarian work, can you kill people because they jump at the food? People are hungry and desperate!

After two weeks we returned to Sulaymaniyah because we heard the regime was not retaliating - it was unbelievable. He didn't kill or arrest everyone as we thought. He wanted people to go back. I knew it was because of the international community's pressure, not because he suddenly became a nice guy.

**epic: Was there any presence of the regime when you returned to Sulaymaniyah?**

Hero: Yes. The regime was present but we were treated as if nothing had happened. They were just trying to

keep everyone calm.

That first uprising was in March 1991. There was another uprising, we called it the Second Uprising and it was in June 1991. And by the Third Uprising in August, we were successful.

**epic: What was it like after the Third Uprising?**

Hero: Everything was changed after that. During all the years of Saddam's power, the regime had wanted to separate each group and make us enemies. Saddam wanted me to hate Arabs and he wanted the Arabs to hate Kurds. In the media he said, "We are all brothers, all the Iraqis." But the actual practice on the ground was to use one ethnic or religious group against another. He was successful. But the Kurdish political parties helped us to realize that it wasn't because Saddam Hussein was Arab, it was because he was a dictator. They didn't want us to hate Arabs.

I felt like I was living a dream after all those years, because of my background and because of my dad. We had freedom to some extent but we weren't sure whether the regime would come back. There was a de facto border where Saddam's forces were stationed. Many people didn't want to invest money, even in their houses, because they thought the regime would return.

**epic: The Kurdish leaders had the military experience, but now they had to govern. How well did they assume the new role?**

Hero: It was difficult but they were successful to some extent. In 1992 we had an election followed by a festival. That year the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was established with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) sharing power in the cabinet and parliament.

For many months, the Kurdish government employees were without salary because we needed time to establish revenue and a system of salary payment. For teachers it was particularly hard because they had to teach every day of the week, whereas other employees were told only to work once or twice a week. At that time we had a motto, a slogan that we wrote all over the walls: "We are strong and we won't surrender for salaries!" We still say it today.

After the election the Kurdish government created a lot of systems for running the region. I can't say they did their best. They focused on their promises but started to think of themselves as individuals. I can't understand that. They were ready to give their lives for us while fighting against Saddam. They sacrificed and many died.

But when they started to rule, some of them started to love money and power more than the people.

**epic:** When did you begin to see that some leaders had forgotten the people?

Hero: Beyond the typical rivalry you would expect between political parties, there was a growing threat of violence breaking out between the PUK and KDP. The 1992 elections heightened tensions, but after the results came in it was just parties and festivals for three days!

Unfortunately, the situation escalated to the point of internal war by 1994. It was difficult; we felt that they had forgotten much of the suffering among us. Some people said there were attempts by the Saddam regime to create ill will between the PUK and KDP. I know they did their best to create problems. Even during the war and fighting, it was better than when the regime was in power. At least it was okay for me to speak in Kurdish.

At least it was safe to visit political offices or government offices or the police. I was no longer afraid if I heard a noise outside or if I heard something on the roof, that it could be the regime's secret police coming to get us.

**epic:** How long did the conflict last?

Hero: They stopped fighting in 1996 but it took a long time to reach an agreement and to remove all the checkpoints that had been set up. It was about 1998-99 that things began to come together again, but they only agreed upon a single ministry last year.

**epic:** What were you doing during that time in your career, your studies?

Hero: I graduated in 1992 in civil engineering. I had rented a room that was like a small hole for me, but I didn't mind. All I wanted to do was listen to the news that year. I just wanted to learn more about political parties and to have the privilege of participating and keeping our leaders to their promises.

During the fighting between the government parties, I worked in a government office in Sulaymaniyah called the Directorate of Public Works and Rehabilitation. We didn't have many projects because there wasn't a budget large enough for engineering projects. Our meager budget for rehabilitating infrastructure was from inter-

national NGOs. There were many grant proposals but little funding. I was young and new and there was gender discrimination as well, so the older engineers got the few chances to work.

I was upset because during the uprising I thought that, as a civil engineer, I could rebuild my country. But I was bored because I didn't have a chance to do real work. I heard that some international NGOs had volunteer opportunities but I couldn't get work with them. We didn't have that sort of system in Iraq.

In 1997, a friend heard about a post in an office called REACH. When I joined REACH I felt like I was doing real work for the first time. I visited some villages and got to know the residents. I had the opportunity to apply some of the principles I had learned: that people are equal and discrimination in any form is wrong. I was lucky REACH had the same vision.

**epic:** What is REACH's mission? Has the mission changed since you joined in 1997?

Hero: Our mission hasn't changed, but we have changed our strategy and focus as the situation changes in Iraq. We help vulnerable groups build sustainable communities regardless of their gender, ethnicity or religious identity. We work for the vulnerable wherever they are located inside Iraq.

**epic:** How did REACH get started?

Hero: Oxfam Great Britain had worked all over Iraq and they had offices in Kurdistan as well. So when Oxfam left Sulaymaniyah in 1995, the Iraqi national staff decided to form their own organization.

I joined REACH two years later. The first village I worked with was called Baraw-e Taza, which was near the border with Iran. This was one of the villages that Saddam had destroyed, so we were working with returning villagers to help rebuild. They had bad experiences with some other NGOs that treated them like second-class citizens, but with REACH they felt equal.

**epic:** How many staff were employed when you first joined REACH?

Hero: At that time it was only the Sulaymaniyah office, which had about 20 staff members, most of them temporary. The core staff was less than 10. Today, we have 45 permanent staff plus some temporary staff for specific projects.

"We created a space for dialogue where shared problem-solving built a community across dividing lines... [The U.S. should] send peacebuilders and mediators instead of the army."

**epic: Where does REACH get its funding?**

Hero: Most of the funding is from international NGOs. In the beginning it came from Christian Aid and there was a contract from the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO). The UK's Department for International Development started to fund us in 1998. There were others such as Peace Wind Japan (PWJ), Dutch Consortium (DC), Oxfam Germany, Mennonite Central Committee, UNHCR, and UNICEF. UNICEF is one of the best UN agencies because most of the other UN agencies just wanted to spend Oil for Food money in the wrong way.

We haven't had any funding from USAID because it doesn't believe in working with Iraqi NGO's directly. They believe there should be six filters: some large corporations, cooperatives, then American NGOs, then some international NGOs then others. This leaves Iraqis with only 10-20% of the whole grant. But we did work with USAID partners like Mercy Corps.

**epic: Where does REACH currently have projects?**

Hero: Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, Kirkuk, a part of Mosul and a part of Diyala. We have presence in Baghdad but we just use it for coordinating and networking with the central government.

**epic: Imagine being an American. Day after day you read the papers and see reports of suicide bombings and sectarian violence.**

Hero: This only describes part of the picture in Iraq. Politicians and the media tend to focus on violence and make you feel it's the whole picture when actually it's not.

Yes, we kill each other, but why do we kill each other? Part of the reason is the occupation, but it's not the only reason. It's also that the Saddam regime made each religious and ethnic group an enemy of the other. Also, many neighbor countries have created problems at various levels. The presence of Iran, Turkey and Syria is very clear.

We--along with the media and the international community--should see hope where people work together. Nobody talks about when Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen help each other, forgive each other and do projects together.

The media rarely reports on Iraqis and NGO's that work hard to rebuild Iraq, the peacebuilding conferences all over the country or the women's organizations that gath-

er together. They don't talk about the Kurds helping and sharing food with the Arab population in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Dohuk. So many of us Iraqis are gathering together, talking about projects, and developing our own solutions, but few of our voices are heard in the media.

**epic: Have economic tensions deepened divisions between ethnic communities?**

Hero: Good question; my answer is yes. One of the reasons for violence is the economic situation. When people don't have enough services and when people don't have jobs, they feel angry and they lose a sense of belonging to Iraq. There are often attempts by terrorist groups and militias to offer services in order to recruit members. When people have services, jobs, and money they don't listen to these groups.

**epic: Can you give an example of peacebuilding in an economically diverse area?**

Hero: There were Iraqi Arabs from south and central Iraq who moved to Kurdistan under the Hussein regime. The regime basically said, "We'll give you a plot of land in Kirkuk and some money if you move there and occupy Kurdish houses." Some Arab tribes didn't agree to it and the Kurdish people still remember and respect that decision, but others agreed to the policy and we considered them occupiers. I hated them for many years.

When the regime fell in 2003, the Kurdish communities and families that had been ousted out of their homes returned, which in turn displaced many Iraqi Arabs. An international NGO funded REACH to help the secondary Arab Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Hawija. However, the NGO ran out of aid money for the last group of IDPs before they could be helped. I demanded the rights of these IDPs and they finally increased the budget.

It was the most difficult thing that I did in my life. I mean, if someone had told me ten years ago that one day I would argue for aid to Arabs who occupied our lands, I wouldn't have believed it. But because of REACH I have been convinced to work for all vulnerable groups regardless of their gender, ethnic, and religious affiliations.

There are many people in Iraq who need help. We never exclude particular groups because when we exclude them we make them angrier: they feel isolated, they can't integrate and they might resort to violence. There's a pact to be one society, one Iraq. To have peace, we should have the ability to forgive and try to start again. To bring people together and find ways of living side-by-side: this is the way to build Iraq's future.

**epic:** Some areas where REACH implements projects are very unstable, like Diyala. How can you implement projects when it's so unstable?

Hero: We involve the community in all aspects of the project cycle, beginning with the assessment until evaluation, so that they are a part of every step in the process. We don't do anything by ourselves; we depend on them for security, to protect us and to tell us when it's dangerous. Sometimes it even got too dangerous for them to work with us and we no longer have access to some of these areas. Nevertheless, we still work in Diyala, where we have served over 70 communities. Since 2003, REACH has implemented projects in over 250 communities across Iraq.

**epic:** Some of the contractors and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) approach security with humvees and body armor. Is this the best form of protection?

Hero: No. Local protection and ownership is. Some NGOs waste money on armored vehicles and body armor, which costs half of their budget. Local protection and ownership doesn't require any money. Most NGOs have come to realize that.

We don't have concrete walls. We never have guards when we go to another location. It's forbidden for any REACH staffer to carry weapons. We don't have armored vehicles. We keep a low profile. We don't put the name of the NGO on our vehicles, especially in dangerous areas. We build trust with people in the community and they protect us. It is important to respect the tradition in any area, to let people understand that you respect what they believe. Thank God, we've never had any victims.

**epic:** Have any projects been attacked?

Hero: No, we've never been attacked, but sometimes we've stopped a project because we've received more than one threat. For example, in some areas there are extremist groups, violent groups, or so-called terrorist groups that are part of the community. Some people believe NGOs are spies or that they work for the British or American government.

We once received a threat in Diyala and we asked the community what they think we should do. We discussed it and found the solution together. They decided to contact that extremist group, violent group, or so-called terrorist group and to explain that REACH is

not some kind of company; it's an NGO and these are their beliefs. They had some meetings and they solved their problems. We ultimately saw the project through to completion.

**epic:** How much does a project normally cost?

Hero: On average for a small project it's about \$3000-\$4000, but it varies. Larger projects might cost \$50,000 to \$100,000. We spend about \$1 million every year, some of which is for salaries and offices.

**epic:** Give us another example of peacebuilding through development.

Hero: There were some Arab and Kurdish villages between Erbil and Mosul with some problems between over water distribution. One of the villages controlled the water valve and the amount of water that went to every village. They didn't provide enough water to some villages, so it was a good place to solve the conflict through a project. We talked with them and explained how we operate, then we told them that if they can't work together then we won't work with them.

In the beginning there was tension; they felt forced to be in the same meetings. We were patient and there was progress at every meeting. They agreed on the project implementation and the amount of water increased. Today, every village gets enough clean water if they use it wisely. We created a

space for dialogue where shared problem solving built a community across dividing lines.

**epic:** How can successes like these be duplicated elsewhere?

Hero: It's not difficult. Peacebuilding through development can be time-consuming, but it's possible. As word spreads it becomes easier for other communities. There are many examples in which two ethnic groups live in the same village and we give them tools to deal with their own problems and conflicts.

**epic:** If the funding was there, what kind of a budget could REACH operate on in, say, 2008?

Hero: If REACH offices work with the CBOs, we have a capacity to spend \$5 million per year. If we work with Iraqi NGOs--we have worked with other NGOs in the south and center of Iraq that we have close relationships with--we might spend another \$2 million.

"The U.S. government contributed to destroying Iraq so they have a responsibility to contribute to its reconstruction... They have the power to do this."

**epic:** Did many women participate in the community development programs?

Hero: Women participate with CBO's at a rate of about 35% to 39% and about 98% of CBOs have female members. Women's participation in rural areas is difficult to achieve. Although the villages are more conservative, we feel there's progress. There are gender workshops and training and there are some success stories of women participating and being very active.

**epic:** How do villagers respond when you visit to monitor and evaluate women's participation?

Hero: Most of the time they don't have problems. For most of the men it's okay. Of course we do our best to make them comfortable. For example, I don't wear "non-conservative (avant-garde)" clothes when I go to a village. They would feel offended because it's unacceptable for them. So we adjust everything--the words we use, the expressions, the clothes--to work with them.

**epic:** What do you feel the U.S. can do to foster better relationships among Iraqi communities?

Hero: First, the U.S. should think about the roots of the conflict and do more research. The U.S. must withdraw its combat forces. They can provide services, jobs and education opportunities, and send peacebuilders and mediators instead of the army. Then the mediators can create space for the conflicting parties to settle their difference and foster greater cooperation among all Iraqis. We can convince the conflicting parties that they have a common interest in Iraq so that they can pursue their interests through non-violent means.

There are many experts in the U.S.: experts in mediation, peacebuilding and negotiation. Not the ones who one day provide weapons and the next day become peacebuilders. I mean real institutions such as Eastern Mennonite University (EMU). The U.S. can use these institutions to train peacebuilders and send them to Iraq.

**epic:** You would like to see American combat troops replaced with peacebuilders and educators?

Hero: Yes. My understanding is that the politicians just want to withdraw forces without any alternative. The U.S. government contributed to destroying Iraq so they have a responsibility to contribute to its reconstruction. They have to do it via development and peacebuilding. Experts in the U.S.—meaning the professors and those who believe in peace and justice and have overseas experience—can train the Iraqi people and they can bring the conflict parties together and create a safe space to transform their conflict. This is what the U.S. government has to do. They have the power to do this.

**epic:** Is there hope for peace in Iraq?

Hero: There's a little hope. If there was no hope I wouldn't come to attend Eastern Mennonite University's Peacebuilding Institute. There are many people in Iraq who want to learn about peacebuilding and therefore we educate people and we give them tools to deal with their problems. We can build on this hope every day. When I meet concerned citizens and see real NGOs in Iraq and the U.S. that work hard for change, I feel there's more hope. These groups, these events, and even one march in the U.S. gives me hope. There are people who feel how much we suffer, and they genuinely share our desire for a better, more peaceful world.

---

The Ground Truth Project is a unique series of interviews with Iraqis, aid workers, and others who have lived, worked or served in Iraq. By offering perspectives about Iraq that can only be gained from being there, EPIC hopes these interviews will inspire meaningful policy change and citizen action in support of a better future for all Iraqis. To support the Ground Truth, please visit <http://www.epic-usa.org/Donate>

EPIC: Promoting a Free & Secure Iraq works to end armed conflict, defend human rights, and build support for peacebuilding and development in Iraq through educational programs, research and advocacy. Founded in 1998, we work closely with non-governmental and government agencies, aid workers, Iraqis and a member network of more than 25,000 concerned citizens across the United States.

**epic**