



**Testimony of Wisam B.
AJC New England Diplomats Seder
March 18, 2018**

My name is Dr. Wisam B. I was born in Baghdad Iraq to a Mandaean family. My father was a teacher. My mother was a housewife, who looked after my brother, two sisters and myself.

The Mandaean religion is one of the oldest monotheistic faiths in the world. Two thousand years ago, we were exiled from Jerusalem and settled in southern Mesopotamia, which today is located in Iraq and Iran. We believe we must use knowledge to help us strive for peace and rectify injustice. Our teachings expressly forbid us from carrying weapons, even for self-defense.

We Mandaeans were the smallest and most vulnerable religious community in Iraq. To escape persecution and continue our way of life, we worked hard to make ourselves almost invisible.

Growing up, my siblings, cousins and I did not take our parents' fears seriously. We had Muslim friends at school. They were Shia and Sunni and we all got along. But eventually we learned that being a Mandaean could be dangerous, even potentially lethal as I learned.

I was about 9 years old when Saddam Hussein's Baathist Party took power in a coup. My uncle, who had been involved in the pro-democracy movement, refused to support Saddam. One day we learned that he had been shot 9 times. My whole family rushed to the hospital. We knew that if the secret police got there first they would make sure he was dead. We stayed with him around the clock, but one day a friendly nurse went in to see him. When the nurse came out, my uncle was bleeding uncontrollably. He died a day later.

A few years later, things got worse. Young Mandaeans were fleeing the country and many of those who remained were being arrested. My mother's oldest sister and her husband were arrested. She was a 57 year old housewife, who practically raised my mother. Every weekend my mother travelled to the Central Prison hoping for information, but we never heard from them again. Fortunately, we were able to

smuggle my aunt and uncle's children out of the country. But, one of my cousins chose to remain. Eventually, the secret police came for him too and we also never saw him again.

My parents feared that my father and I would be arrested next and that my sister would be kidnapped and taken away. So, I took her to England. Fearing for my father's safety, however, I returned to Iraq and enrolled as a student in a school of veterinary medicine. Of the 500 students, only three of us were not members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. This was dangerous, so I worked hard to be a good student, make friends and avoid political involvement. After graduation, I founded a veterinary clinic with one of my professors. Amongst our clients were European diplomats with whom I became friendly.

In August 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. The international reaction was swift. By January, an American led army was ready to liberate Kuwait. The secret police began rounding up people who they felt might be disloyal. I was a Mandaean, who maintained friendships with foreign diplomats and was not a Baath Party member. The writing was on the wall. My family devised an elaborate plan to get me out of the country. Thereafter, my diplomatic friends helped my family and me settle in Spain. A year later we were granted asylum here in United States and Boston became home.

Today Mandeans are less than 60,000 people scattered in more than two dozen countries around the world. In the years since my arrival in America, I have been able to sponsor and settle over 2,500 Mandaean refugees and together we have reestablished a small Mandaean community in Worcester, Massachusetts. Like each of them, coming to America meant that for the first time in my life I did not fear the fact that I am a Mandaean, or that my name is Bxxx. It is my Mandaean name and I did not have to teach my son to fear using it.

In 2014, I founded a biomedical device company. I named it Bxxx Scientific. Today, I stand tall among you and can call myself "Bxxx"!

This has been my journey to freedom.