

As journalists, we are the messengers, not the story, I remind myself as I glance around the refugee camp on the outskirts of Dohuk, Iraqi Kurdistan.

I'm on the trail of ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), who are close by and – if my translator Beshad is to be believed – could be watching us from inside the camp.

“Dohuk” means “Yazidi village”, a reference to a Kurdish religious community – indigenous to the area – whose faith dates back to the 12th century. ISIL jihadists consider them the worst kind of infidels and have been carrying out genocide on them since August 2014.

Beshad explains that there's no knowing if there's a refugee here whose loved one has been captured by ISIL and who wouldn't think twice about handing over a Western journalist to buy their freedom. “Don't trust anyone,” he warns. It's advice that could save my life, but it also makes my work more difficult.

For over a week we've been hoping to cross the Kurdish military checkpoint to travel into “no-man's land” beyond the city, but the tedious bureaucracy requires endless

paperwork. We change our car number-plate daily in case we're being followed.

We finally get the nod and set off for Rabia, a small Iraqi town bordering Syria. We pass damaged and burnt-out vehicles and many destroyed buildings. To the east is the city of Mosul which, until two days ago, was ISIL territory. But intensive fighting has finally pushed the jihadists back – although only just.

The Kurdish commander welcomes us into his tent, where we sip steaming cups of mint tea from tiny glasses on broken saucers. He opens a few tins of cold beans and apologises that he can't be more hospitable. “I didn't have time to prepare for your arrival,” he smiles.

Before the war, this town might have attracted tourists. But its 70 000 residents are long gone, having fled to the refugee camps dotting the landscape. The entire place is booby-trapped, a tactic the jihadists employ when retreating, to prevent inhabitants from returning. The fighters lie low during the day. But during the night I'm awoken from inside my sleeping bag behind the sandbags by a Peshmerga tank firing repeatedly at them.

“We couldn't save our women and children,”

the commander tells me with a sad, vacant smile. “That's the worst part.”

The stories echo through the refugee camps, which are eerily empty of women and where a heavy cloud of shame has descended. As is their practice, the jihadists always kill the men first and then force the women and children onto buses to Mosul, where they are sold as sex slaves at local markets for a few hundred dollars. The younger women command the best price.

Amira is 27 years old. Her blue eyes and acne-scarred skin are hidden in a green shawl as she tells me in a whisper of the fate of her sister, who was taken hostage three weeks earlier. We're sitting on the floor of a refugee tent outside Dohuk.

“She managed to call me and tell me about the terrible things they were doing to her,” she sobs. “And so I told her to kill herself.”

Here the interview stops. Through mangled sobs Amira asks me what kind of sister tells her sibling to kill herself... I exhale slowly. As the tears make their way down my cheeks I clasp her hands tighter. I, too, have a younger sister. As journalists, we are the messengers, not the story. 🌈

HOSPITALITY IN INHOSPITABLE PLACES

As the Middle East Bureau Chief for Russia Today, Jo'burg-born **Paula Slier** has had her fair share of hair-raising encounters. She shares first-hand encounters of her travels off the beaten track. (@PaulaSlier_RT)

