

Little Baghdad, California

Written by Arun Gupta
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NABEEL USED TO WORK FOR the Americans in Iraq. He was a security team leader for the Research Triangle Institute, a U.S. contractor that was paid more than half-a-billion dollars to run “local governance programs” throughout the country. He survived three car-bombing attempts. “I was lucky,” he says nonchalantly.

But as GIs began to exit Iraq in 2011, he knew that his luck would not last. Nabeel says that some guys threatened him: “We will kill your son. We will get revenge when the Americans leave Iraq.” Nabeel didn’t need much more encouragement, given the collapse of public services that had made life arduous, so he applied for a special immigration visa for Iraqis employed on behalf of the U.S. government. With his family, he immigrated to El Cajon, California, in July 2011.

He expected a warm welcome and a decent standard of living for helping the war effort.

“When I came to the United States, I thought I would be better than the prime minister in Iraq,” recalls Nabeel. “Now, I am jealous of the street cleaner.”

Six friends of his nod in agreement. They are sitting in a sparsely furnished office in El Cajon, a city of 101,000 residents east of San Diego. The door says Babylon Design and Printing, but they jokingly call it the “Babylon coffee shop.” Outside, palm trees stand still in the damp night air. Inside hang oil paintings of Middle Eastern marketplaces and rural life.

All seven knew each other in Babil province, south of Baghdad. All worked for U.S. contractors. All escaped Iraq because of threats and the collapse of public services. Now, however, all are unhappy, most are jobless, and some wish they had never left Iraq despite the violence and chaos.

Also in the office are Ahmad Talib and Huda Al-Jabiri. They fled Iraq in the late '90s, and spent five days walking without food to the Iranian border while Huda was eight months pregnant. The couple is employed as social workers resettling refugees. Ahmad says he is aware of five families who came to El Cajon recently and returned to Iraq.

“Many of the older generation want to go back,” Ahmad says. “This is not their culture. They have friends, families, memories in Iraq. One said, ‘If I am killed by a suicide bomber, I die once. Here in America, I die every day. I struggle with rent, I struggle with language, I struggle with

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work.’ ”

By one measure, the seven friends are fortunate. Out of a sea of four million Iraqis displaced since 2003, a relative trickle of 85,000 has been admitted to the United States. From 2003 to 2006, the United States accepted a mere 735 Iraqi refugees. Only after the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act became law in January 2008 did the United States start letting in a significant number of Iraqis.

While Michigan has a larger population of Iraqi descent, El Cajon is the top destination for this round of refugees partly because the State Department has discouraged refugees from settling in the economically depressed Detroit area. Professor John Weeks, a demographer at San Diego State University, estimates that the Iraqi population in San Diego County has swelled by an average of 400 a month since 2008, and El Cajon is now almost one-third Iraqi American.

But new refugees often encounter a rude awakening. The city’s poverty rate is 23 percent, and the unemployment rate at the end of 2012 was 11 percent. Moreover, El Cajon is still trying to live down its tag as the “meth capital of the world,” and it retains a hard-bitten feel evidenced by a robbery rate 50 percent above the national average.

Nonetheless, refugees say the warm, sunny weather is a welcome reminder of home, and for decades El Cajon has become a magnet for many of Iraq’s persecuted. Thousands of Kurds started arriving following a failed revolt in 1976. After the 1991 Gulf War, Saddam Hussein crushed a Shi’a uprising encouraged by the senior Bush Administration, and some 1,500 Shi’a who escaped found their way to El Cajon. There are also Mandaean, whose 2,000-year-old Gnostic culture is in danger of extinction, and Yezidis, practitioners of an ancient syncretic religion. But far and away, it’s the estimated 30,000 Chaldean Catholics in El Cajon who have enlivened the city with Iraqi culture, many having first settled there in the 1950s. Main Street is nicknamed “Little Baghdad” for the proliferation of Arab-language signs and Iraqi-owned restaurants, markets, jewelry stores, auto shops, and cultural centers.

Everyone who has contact with the community says the number one problem is the lack of jobs. Khattab Aljubori talks proudly of the \$4,000 a month he earned in Iraq as an IT specialist. He fled in November 2010 because of threats to his family and now gets by on welfare and whatever computer work he can scrounge.

According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study on the health of Iraqi refugees who settled in the United States after 2009, 67 percent of adults are unemployed, including 85 percent of those over 45 years old.

Suhail Putras is one of those who has found a job in El Cajon. He works as a cook at Ali Baba restaurant, which is decorated like an Arabian tent, with plush blue and white fabric covering the walls and ceiling, and beaded entrances shaped like arches. As Suhail talks, waiters hustle silver platters heaped with yellow rice, chopped vegetables, pickled radishes, glistening kebabs, and fresh-baked flatbreads the size of hubcaps. He left in 2008, and makes no bones that he’s glad to be gone. “Iraq was the paradise, now it’s the hell,” he says. The Mahdi Army, a Shi’a militia, bombed his family’s liquor store in Baghdad. “I was shocked that people I’ve been living

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with thirty years came with a knife for my back,” he says. He says his future, and more important, that of his children, is in the United States. But he tears up when asked if he misses Baghdad. “I was born there, I was married there, I have happy and sad memories there,” he says.

Every refugee confronts these contradictory forces. Nabeel says he’s landed work as a security guard, but it’s not enough.

“This is not a better life for me, but for my family, yes,” he says. “We sacrifice for our family. I want a better future and education for my kids.”

Mohammed chimes in. A civil engineer who bolted from Iraq in October 2011 after two of his co-workers at the Cooperative Housing Foundation, a U.S.-based NGO, were gunned down in the street, he is frustrated at being unable to support his family.

“I worked with Americans in my country, but I have no experience to work in America,” he says. He has a simple solution: “So give us a job,” he says, referring to the government. “If they keep Saddam Hussein, we will never be here.”

Ahmad says some Iraqis in El Cajon believe they deserve welfare. They think, “This is our money, they took our oil.”

“These refugees are a direct consequence of our decision of having invaded Iraq,” adds Professor Weeks. “Some of these refugees, not all of them, come with the attitude that you ruined our country, you owe us.”

It’s not hard to understand why. Farah Muhsin, who came to San Rafael, California, in 2008 to study political science, says her family decamped to Syria in May 2003 after her mother, a journalist in Iraq, appeared on “death lists issued by the Badr Brigade and the Da’wa Party.”

“If you go to Iraq today, they say America has destroyed our country and allowed criminals and warlords to become politicians, take control of our government and imprison and torture thousands of people,” Muhsin says. “As harsh and cruel was life under Saddam Hussein, it was much better than today.”

Estimates of the number of Iraqis killed during the last decade range from 150,000 to one million. Trauma among Iraqi refugees in Syria, with 90 percent suffering from depression and 68 percent from post-traumatic stress disorder, far outstrips that suffered by civilians in Kosovo and Afghanistan.

The moment Iraqis land in the United States they face new struggles. First, Ahmad explains, they are usually in debt to the International Organization for Migration, which provides an interest-free loan for the airline fare to bring them over. “A family of five might owe \$6,000, and they have to start making payments in three months,” he says.

Social workers say each refugee receives a “reception and placement” grant of \$1,100 for rent,

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security deposit, furnishing, bedding, food, and other essentials. But for a childless couple that may not be enough to secure an apartment. “When you come here,” says Ahmad, “you get the worst apartment, the cheapest one they can find, and donated furniture.”

Salam Hassan, a thirty-seven-old-year computer engineer living in Berkeley, who served as a fixer in Baghdad for journalists like Naomi Klein, Dahr Jamail, and Christian Parenti before escaping mortal danger in 2005, says single male refugees in the Bay Area wind up in West Oakland, “famous for its violent history, because it’s poor, and the rent is cheaper.” A number of refugees in Oakland have been robbed and assaulted, and Farah Muhsin says, “One Iraqi man was mugged and was shot five times, and is now permanently disabled.”

Hassan, who has taken so many refugees under his wing that his apartment was dubbed “the Iraqi Embassy,” says they are packed “three to four people per one-bedroom apartment. They get four months assistance, then are switched to a program that just covers their rent and \$200 a month for food stamps.”

It’s an expensive and difficult process to make it to the United States—one refugee, a nuclear engineer, said it cost him \$40,000—so adults tend to be professionals with advanced degrees in fields like medicine, engineering, and accounting. But the pressure to find jobs is relentless, and getting recertified is a laborious process. In the meantime, Ahmad says, “We find them jobs that no one else takes—fast food, housecleaning, parking-lot attendants.” Huda notices the change in their demeanor after they arrive: “You look at their faces. They are so proud of their degrees and their experience, and then they are told to clean sixteen hotel rooms a day.”

Ahmad is cynical as to why the United States lets in refugees: “They’re cheap labor.” But he’s quick to add, “They are survivors.” They confront obstacles at every corner—navigating a byzantine health care system, living in substandard conditions, learning how to use credit, taking crowded ESL classes with overwhelmed instructors. “But they will get up at 5 a.m., commute two hours, work a full day, get home at 7 or 8 p.m., and do it again the next day.”

Mark Lewis is mayor of El Cajon. Now sixty-four, he’s been in office since 1998 and grew up here. If he is any indication, cultural misunderstandings are abundant. He says single women have complained to him about not being served in Chaldean-owned establishments, and he’s warned them they must serve women. He says, “In our society the female is the same as the male. They haven’t got that through their heads yet.”

Lewis says some Chaldean schoolchildren who receive free lunches are “being picked up by Mercedes Benzes.” He adds: “First time, they come over here, it doesn’t take them too long to learn where all the freebies are at.” This, he says, causes “a lot of resentment in regard to veterans,” who ask, “Why can’t [the federal government] support veterans like they support minorities coming over here?” Lewis says this is creating “white flight.”

Advocates say that not enough is being done for Iraqi immigrants. “They need more educational programs,” Huda says, dismissing as laughable the four hours of cultural orientation some receive as their entire introduction to American society. Ahmad adds that adults need more activities “so they’re not just wandering the streets,” which is a common sight in El Cajon. Then

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there's the issue of transportation, with many relying on a bus system that's costly and inadequate. Most important, says Huda, "They need time for recovery and to learn the language and culture. Don't put them to work right away."

For many Iraqi immigrants in El Cajon, the adjustment to the United States is just too much. "I'm a nation to myself," Salam Hassan says, explaining that he doesn't feel at ease in either America or Iraq.

[Source](#)

Arun Gupta is co-founder of The Independent newspaper and The Occupied Wall Street Journal and is a regular contributor to The Guardian, Truthout, and In These Times.

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