

***FROM NO HELP TO SELF-HELP:
IRAQI REFUGEES IN THE U.S. STRUGGLE TO REBUILD LIVES***

An Iraqi in New York

Nour Al-Khal is sitting at the MetroCafe on Fifth Avenue, talking about how she managed to get out of Iraq alive after the FBI abandoned her on one of the meanest streets in Baghdad. She breaks off mid-sentence to ask a customer sitting two tables away whether she's all right. The other woman, plump and middle aged, is coughing and gasping for breath.

"I just hiccupped but thank you! Are you a doctor?"

"I had a course in first aid!" Al-Khal exclaims, exploding into girlish laughter. The silver beads on her black hijab sparkle as she throws her head back. She seems energetic, quick, far younger than her 32 years. Even in New York's summer heat, she wears a full-sleeved light purple shirt.

The other customer is immediately taken in. "Where are you from?"

"Iraq."

"Oh, I'm so sorry about what's happening there. You live there?"

"No more." Al-Khal smiles and points to the city outside. "I live here."

The woman apologizes earnestly for President Bush and the United States and the damage to Al-Khal's homeland.

"I know it's the government and not the average people," Al-Khal counters. "I understand that. It's the government and the politicians."

Americans, Al-Khal says later, don't know what's going on in Iraq. Even the FBI—which investigated her for three months in Baghdad after the 2005 murder of her

co-worker, American journalist Steven Vincent in Basra—didn't know what was going on or what her future might be. "The FBI told me you should never dream of getting to the US. Even London, no."

The FBI had earlier promised her safe passage to the US but reneged, Al-Khal says; she thinks that happened because no one was really clear about the rules. "They even don't communicate properly with each other."

These days, after work as an assistant at a Midtown real estate firm, Al-Khal frequently spends her evenings dealing with health problems from the kidnapping that led to Vincent's death. She still has a bullet in her left leg, but it's her right leg that's giving her trouble. Doctors at the American hospital in Baghdad's Green Zone removed a bullet from that leg, and now, lymph fluid appears to be accumulating. Her doctor in New York has told her she needs to walk and exercise.

Al-Khal finishes her salad—she won't eat meat unless it's halal (slaughtered right according to Islamic requirements)—and wends her way down to Union Square, where she often spends half an hour reading on the grass. At the moment, she's working through a book of New York cabbie jokes she found lying on a sidewalk. The jokes teach her about the way Americans view different ethnic groups, she says. She also just likes the wit. That's how she keeps things light, trying to do something pleasant for herself every day. It's one way of coping with her past.

She's also seeing a therapist, though to do so, she's had to overcome negative stereotypes. Among Arab women, "the perception about psychiatrists, you don't go there unless you are mentally ill or unbalanced," she explains. But Al-Khal decided, "I'm going to go there. I need to talk about the past."

And the past has been traumatizing. Al-Khal had worked as Vincent's translator and fixer in Basra, in Iraq's tumultuous and dangerous southern region. Vincent was a free-lance journalist and blogger, the only western journalist hanging around town without security or bodyguards. By August 2005, the work of journalists—western or otherwise—had become a form of Russian roulette.

Vincent had received threats. "People start threatening us through the cell phone," says Al-Khal. "And people start approaching him and telling him, 'Your translator's life is in danger if you leave her behind you'."

On August 2, 2005, the pair were on their way to meet a religious leader whose organization was located nearby and they had decided to walk from their hotel.

On the way, four men in Iraqi police uniforms grabbed them. Both resisted and Al-Khal says she initially pulled away and ran to hide inside one of the stores only a few meters away. But the kidnappers threatened to kill the store owner if she didn't surrender, so she did. "I didn't want anyone to get hurt because of me."

The kidnappers pushed Al-Khal and Vincent into a car, beating them with fists and guns. Al-Khal attempted to do her job—to translate. "Steven wanted me to explain to them why he was in Iraq and how much he liked Islam and Muslims. He was wearing a shirt with Islamic symbols on it. But all the time I wanted to speak to them, they hushed me, they silenced me." And they hit her. "I spit blood in the car." It occurred to her that the stains might help the police catch her abductors.

They drove around the city streets for approximately six hours, Vincent bleeding from repeated blows to his head. The abductors told him, "From now on, you should know what to write about." They were referring to a strongly-worded article he'd

published days earlier in the New York Times, exposing the way Iranian intelligence had infiltrated the Basra police.

At midnight, the car stopped in the city center. The attackers had promised that their victims would survive. "They swear to God many, many times," Al-Khal recalled, "Whenever we asked them, they said, 'No, we swear by God, we swear by Allah, we're not going to kill you and we're going to send you back'."

When they let Al-Khal and Vincent out of the car, Al-Khal ran a few steps ahead to call a taxi and take Vincent to her family's home. She heard shots—and felt them. Vincent was shot in the head, Al-Khal in the chest and both legs. She said her final prayers, expecting to die. Instead a police patrol picked her up. She was ultimately transported to an American hospital in the Green Zone.

There, FBI officials investigating Vincent's murder would keep her in custody for three months, before refusing to assist her in getting a US visa as she says they'd promised, eventually dumping her unceremoniously in one of the city's most dangerous neighborhoods. Then Al-Khal's second ordeal, as an Iraqi-refugee-in-waiting, would begin.

Unwanted Guests

As a result of the 2003 American-led invasion, Iraqis are the second largest refugee population in the world with 2.3 million refugees, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This does not include the 2.7 million forced from their homes who have become "internal refugees" in their own land. In all, fifteen percent of the Iraqi population—close to 5 million people—has been displaced.

Syria and Jordan host the majority of these refugees; the rest are largely in Iran, Lebanon and Egypt. Each of these countries already harbors other refugee populations: approximately 1 million Afghans in Iran, and 400,000 Palestinians in Lebanon. Egypt hosts so many Sudanese and other African refugees that it has closed its borders to Iraqis.

The influx of Iraqi refugees has overwhelmed Iraq's neighbors, the humanitarian organization Refugees International warns, and could lead to further destabilization in the region. Last year, about 60,000 Iraqis fled their homes every month.

Iraq's neighbors, struggling to cope with the influx, require assistance. "Jordan, especially is bursting at the seams," says Kathleen Newland of the Migration Policy Institute, co-author of the Institute's report on Iraqi refugees. Newland visited Syria and Jordan this February to survey the situation. "The pressure is tremendous on the infrastructure."

That's why, even when neighboring countries admit Iraqis, they discourage permanent resettlement. Neither Syria, Jordan nor Lebanon is a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention; they treat Iraqi refugees as "guests". In Lebanon, for example, Iraqis live as "outlaws" facing arrest, detention and deportation, says International Rescue Committee advocacy officer Nathaniel Hurd. "They're afraid of being picked up and jailed, of being returned to Iraq." Many people hide in their homes.

Even where services are available, refugees are unlikely to take advantage of them, Hurd adds. "Thousands of slots go unfilled in schools because they are terrified that if they register they will get on the radar screen. The result is that kids are out of schools."

As time passes, "many have blown through their savings, if they came with savings," explains Hurd. "They're living in apartments, often in shoddy conditions, and vulnerable to being taken advantage of by landlords." Many lack the ability or the legal right to work.

Waiting: One Refugee's Story

Mohammad Al-Karkhi, for instance, spent nearly all his savings during his time in Syria. A local producer for NBC in Baghdad, Al-Karkhi had already sent his wife and three children to live in Damascus. He escaped from his hometown himself last year after a neighbor, who'd been kidnapped and released by the Sadr Brigade, warned that they were after Al-Karkhi too.

"He tells me..."They asked about you in details...They know your family is in Syria. They know you're working for the Americans'."

Al-Karkhi is sitting on a dark sofa, one of the few pieces of furniture in his sparse apartment in the Bronx. It's a squalid graffitied building with steep stairs and peeling paint. The apartment has a temporary situation feeling; there's nothing on the walls except three photographs, two of each of the grandparents, one of Mohammad with his family.

Al-Karkhi is immaculately groomed, dressed in pressed dark pants and a light shirt. Two of his three children, whispering in rapid Arabic, huddle at a dining table nearby. His wife sits in a hard-backed chair listening intently to catch the unfamiliar sounds of English. Al-Karkhi continues with his story, his polite, calm manner hardly betraying its gravity. He could be discussing the weather.

Ten days after that bone-chilling conversation with his neighbor, Al-Karkhi got a call. His former professor at Baghdad University told him, " 'Mohammad, they came. They are looking for you, and they talked in a very tough way'." She urged him never to return to the school where he'd been studying.

Al-Karkhi discussed the situation with his friend, NBC's Baghdad correspondent Richard Engel, who agreed that Al-Karkhi should quit his post and leave for Syria. It was a tough decision. Al-Karkhi, who'd previously worked at the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, had begun as a translator for NBC after the fall of Baghdad and become a local producer. "I had worked at that job for 4 years and then I lost it in one day with that phone call. You lose it in a second. It damaged everything. It was a kind of suffering." Al-Karkhi pauses, gazing at the floor.

Engel and his colleagues in New York, including Tom Brokaw, wrote letters in support of Al-Karkhi; with those in hand, he crossed the border into Syria. "But the price is, I have no job in Syria," explains Al-Karkhi. "I'm the father of the family. I'm responsible about the family and the job." Al-Karkhi hunted all year for work, "looking here, there, everywhere. But, there was an order by the Syrian government not to allow for any Iraqi to work in Syria."

Meanwhile, the price of oil skyrocketed and, along with it, everything else. "Prices went up in a crazy way: apartments, food, whatever." Paying \$700 US dollars rent per month and another \$200 for utilities, the family was soon out of money and had to rely on small sums sent by their parents. Meanwhile, Al-Karkhi's eldest daughter, fifteen year old Mais, was having trouble adjusting to her new environment. She often returned home from her Damascus school in tears.

"It changes all of your life: what you're planning for your future, your family, your relatives, your relationships with people," Al-Karkhi says. "They damage all of that. Just a call."

Refugees live in a suspended state with few good choices. To remain is often not an option, as in Lebanon. Returning to Iraq has also become a problem. The new Iraqi government has asked refugees outside Iraq to remain where they are for now. "There are factions in the Iraqi government," explains Newland. "Some say refugees are politically unreliable and shouldn't be encouraged to come back."

With no income and his savings nearly exhausted, Al-Karkhi began trying to gain entry to the United States.

Responsibility by the Numbers

The US needs to respond to these refugees' plight, argue many in humanitarian assistance organizations. "The US has a unique responsibility to those refugees," says Makenzie Brookes of the International Rescue Committee, who works with refugees in the organization's New York office.

"This is an unintended consequence of unilateral US actions in Iraq," adds Hurd.

At the Lifeline for Iraqi Refugees, a program of Human Rights First, Ruthie Epstein concurs, saying that the US has an obligation to assist Iraqi refugees "because of the US's leading role in the war."

Newland is similarly unequivocal. "We started this war."

The consensus is that "responsibility" means that the US ought to pay at least half these refugees' medical and education costs. "Host countries are really feeling the pinch in the schooling and healthcare system, and low income housing," say Newland.

But the primary responsibility, the State Department argues, rests with the Iraqi government which has a budget surplus this year. The US will continue to "engage in a very candid dialogue with the Government of Iraq about both its responsibilities and its means," said Ambassador James Foley, Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugee Issues, during an April press briefing. Foley acknowledged the shortfall between need and donations, but said that the US has "contributed well beyond...the traditional level of U.S. assistance." The government doesn't want to go beyond those levels, he said, because it would create a "disincentive" for other potential donors.

The US has contributed over \$1 billion towards helping Iraqi refugees since 2003, according to the State Department. Total contributions for this fiscal year—disbursed by the US government through the State Department, USAID and non-governmental organizations—totals \$208 million. But Jordan and Syria alone have reported needing \$2.6 billion. Meanwhile, the US has spent over \$500 billion on the invasion since 2003, and a Congressional Research Report estimate last February said the invasion continues to cost about \$10 billion each month.

The "responsibility" that human rights advocates talk about, however, extends beyond finances to permanent resettlement. While that appears difficult in Jordan, Syrian officials seemed more willing, says Newland, who spoke with them, because they "can use the skills of these people." But that integration, too, requires money.

The US meanwhile, resettled 300 Iraqis in fiscal year 2003 and a mere 70 the following year. By contrast, Australia resettled over 1,500 in each of those years. The US has reached its highest number so far in fiscal 2008: 8,815.

In the fall of 2007, former Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) Ellen Sauerbrey announced that the US "will resettle 12,000 this [fiscal] year. And I have no doubt that we will make that goal." Though Sauerbrey has since been replaced by Ambassador Foley, the State Department maintains that goal. But the effort is falling short with 8,815 Iraqis admitted for resettlement to date. The State Department has until the end of September, when the fiscal year ends, to make its 12,000 refugees goal.

In addition, the Department of Homeland Security in July expanded its special immigrant visa (SIVs) program to 5,000. These visas, mandated by the Kennedy-Smith Act, are available for Iraqis who have worked with the US government, not including those classified as "refugees" such as Nour Al-Khal or Mohammad Al-Karkhi.

To be legally categorized a refugee, the person must leave his country of origin and apply for refugee status at the UNHCR office in his or her host country. After being vetted by the UNHCR and classified a refugee, the resettlement process begins. The UNHCR forwards the application to the destination country via the International Organization of Migration (IOM), which also runs security checks.

The UNHCR has already referred 12,997 applications to the US between October 2007 and April 2008. They must undergo another layer of security checks by an American committee comprised of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials. The current average waiting time for the US to process an Iraqi refugee is anywhere from 6-10 months, depending on whether one asks the State Department or humanitarian organizations.

Comparatively, "the case processing time for Iraqis is less than refugees from Burma or Somalia. Six months is a very short time," said an official from the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration.

The process is often chaotic, however, filled with delays fraught with tension. "You don't know when you're going to get the green light. Is it okay? Fine? The process is fine? Nobody tells you anything," says Al-Karkhi.

At the beginning, his own process seemed to go well. After arriving in Syria in June, 2007, Al-Karkhi and his entire family got their first interview with UNHCR on July 4th; the interview lasted over an hour as Al-Karkhi was drilled about why he had left Iraq. "They ask me in details, especially the dates, where and when what happened."

The family was photographed and received protection papers. They were now registered as refugees, opening the door to possible resettlement in the United States.

He prodded the Syrian official processing them about what came next, Al-Karkhi says. "They keep saying we don't know, we don't know." He starts laughing, "When I insist on her, she said 'Yeah, so far you have a good case, as a journalist, as a Sunni.' That's it. I think they have a responsibility to never say anything."

He got a second hour-long interview later that same month. "It was something great to me! Even the people in the United States, they were very happy about that. One month! Two interviews! Very good." He smiles, recalling how elated he had felt.

This time, the officials processing Al-Karkhi also accepted the recommendation letters he'd gathered from acquaintances and work colleagues, and told him to expect a call in October. "We are waiting," says Al-Karkhi sounding more somber. "October is

finished. November is finished. I am calling them. They say just wait. Nobody can say anything. I wait."

Finally, a UNHCR media officer let him in on what was going on. "I saw her face to face and she said, 'To be honest with you Mohammad, the Syrian government refused to give visas to the American committee.'" The committee which processed Iraqis for resettlement in the US had been denied permission to enter Syria.

"So how's it going to be solved?," Al-Karkhi asked the officer.

"Don't know."

"How?"

"Don't know."

Friends from NBC and elsewhere called Al-Karkhi to reassure him, but "it was a very very hard time to me, believe me, very difficult." His family felt the strain as well and used to watch his face when he took phone calls to see if they could discern a smile that might mean good news.

By the end of 2007, still without work, "The hope is going down. I was desperate for my family. I decided, that's it." Al-Karkhi packed his bags, planning to return to Baghdad for work.

"I was just like a boat looking for a safe port, just like a boat in a big sea, looking for a place to park."

The US has been particularly remiss about the Iraqi refugee situation, Hurd contends. It has historically resettled about half of the refugees that the UNHCR refers according to the US government's Office of Refugee Resettlement; in this case, it's a far

lower percentage. Of the 8,000 plus refugees the UNHCR directed to the US by June 2007, only 1,608 were admitted by close of fiscal 2007.

These figures may be smaller partially because the State Department has admitted that, even as late as February 2007, it "had virtually no refugee processing infrastructure" in the two key countries, Syria and Jordan, where the majority of Iraqis have fled. Since then, it says, it has established a better facilities and now thinks that it will meet its goal for fiscal 2008. "I believe we will," said a State Department official. "I believe we're going to hit that level."

But, advocates say, the issue transcends lack of infrastructure. "The US is not doing in this case what it has done traditionally," argues Hurd. "What's unique about this conflict is that it's hyper-politicized."

The State Department set up a task force to deal with the question of Iraqi refugees in February 2007. But a recent report by the Migration Policy Institute cites Director for Refugees John Merrill, at the Office of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Middle East Iraq Office, as saying that "the task force never meets." And that, some advocates say, shows a lack of political will.

Two current debates have influenced the Iraqi refugee crisis. The first is the ongoing immigration controversy. After September 11, "The number of refugees the US takes took a real nose-dive," Hurd says. "We're asking that it return to our historical levels." The State Department says that is the consequence of a revamped immigration process after 9/11 under the Department of Homeland Security. The stricter security requirements mean that fewer numbers of refugees will be accepted.

But the delays also reflect fears—as well as stereotypes—related to terrorism. "To the average American, you turn on the television set and what do you see in Iraq? Bombs going off, people killing each other," Hurd says. "We don't want that. We don't want to bring those people over here."

"The irony," Hurd adds, is that "refugee settlement is one of the most difficult ways to get to the US, because of all the security checks."

Suspect by Association

That's why Abdulla Mizead decided to come to the US as a student, rather than go through refugee resettlement. A translator and later producer for NPR, Mizead applied to the Journalism school at Columbia University in order to become eligible for a student visa.

The situation was getting increasingly dangerous in Iraq. His best friend, Knight Ridder journalist Yasser Salihee, was killed by a US sniper with a single bullet to the head in June 2005 as he drove to get gas so he could take his family to a swimming pool. "I had a very emotional attachment to him," Mizead says. "I was the first to get the call about him being killed."

It is unclear whether the sniper mistook Salihee for a suicide bomber or whether—as some speculate—this was a targeted killing of a journalist who'd been reporting on the similarity between El Salvadoran death squads and the US military's new "Wolf Brigade" in Baghdad.

Following Salihee's killing, Mizead's own father was kidnapped in December 2006, and Mizead knew there were people also looking for him, the Iraqi working with the Americans. He decided it was time to leave. "I wanted to come to spare my life. My

wife almost got kidnapped. I got a threat." Daily life had become overwhelming. "She couldn't go out to do the shopping."

Mizead knew how difficult the refugee track was. He applied, instead, to several US universities, hoping to emigrate as a student. Accepted by Columbia University, which gave him a grant for his studies, Mizead quit NPR which he says, refused to give him the severance package it had earlier promised. "They don't do contracts there, only an oral agreement." But, he adds, NPR did give him \$10,000 towards the \$20,000 ransom for his father.

Mizead applied for a student visa, and after a successful immigration interview in Syria, arrived in the US with his wife and two kids, Danya and Mohammed, in early 2007. He immediately applied for asylum.

His lawyer advised Mizead not to disclose that he had paid a ransom for his abducted father, whom Mizead now believes is dead; under the PATRIOT Act, this is considered aiding and abetting terrorists. "I was telling my lawyer, that's a critical part of my asylum" application, since it is common for militias to also kidnap relatives of those they are after.

He couldn't deny the ransom payment anyway, Mizead knew. "It'll show up on Google, because I did a story on it."

As expected, Mizead's case was forwarded to immigration court. Mizead's lawyer told him it would be an exceptional case. He was lucky. "I expected worse. I got asylee status" in May. But he still believes that US government assumes that people from "a country like Iraq, they're probably terrorists." He also believes that, "they don't want Iraqis here because that would send a message that they failed in Iraq."

The degree to which there's caution about accepting refugees is certainly new. Months after the Vietnam war wound down for instance, the US resettled 131,000 Vietnamese refugees between May and December, 1975.

The lines are murkier in this case, says Newland. "In Vietnam, it was very easy to see who were our allies." In Iraq however, "We've worked with Sunnis and Shi'as" and therefore, says Newland, "It's much less clear to say, these are our guys."

Broken Promises

Before Vincent's and Al-Khal's kidnapping, he'd made a marriage proposal. It was a plan hatched by Vincent and his wife, Lisa Ramaci, to get Al-Khal out of Iraq. "He called Lisa and told her he was getting threats," explains Al-Khal. He confided that he was worried about leaving his translator behind. "So Lisa, in so simple a way, said, 'Turn Muslim, get married to her.'" Vincent would marry Al-Khal and take her to Jordan. There, Vincent would help her apply for a visa for Britain, where she had friends willing to help her.

Al-Khal had quit a prestigious job at USAID some months earlier when she learned that the money being poured into new democratic institutes was actually funding extremists, she says

But, Al-Khal never told her family that she quit in order to take on far more perilous work as Vincent's translator. They didn't know the danger Al-Khal was in, and they refused to allow her to leave Iraq for Jordan by herself. In the tense climate, the trip itself could be dangerous.

Vincent turned up at Al-Khal's house and, after explaining that he would convert to Islam, asked for Al-Khal's hand in marriage. Her family was thrilled; they liked him.

That's how it happened that Lisa Ramaci spoke with the other woman. "There was this small voice on the phone, and she said, 'I want you to know ma'am, that I'm not going to take him away from you'."

Ramaci laughs about it now, sitting in her colorful book-lined living room on the Lower East Side. She is a tall, wild haired biker who works at an auction house in New Jersey; fiercely stunning in head-to-toe black, she's intimidating except for eyes that crinkle into laughter easily.

A simply dressed Al-Khal sits across from Ramaci on the sofa and continues the story. "So, he came to my family, he proposed to me, he gave me dowry"—about \$2,000—"and we were about to get married."

Ramaci shrugs. "It would've worked if he hadn't gotten shot."

After Vincent's death, Ramaci began inquiring about Al-Khal, who by then had been given \$2,000 by the FBI and left to fend for herself. She was living in a Baghdad hotel, too afraid to go home because she feared what might befall her family.

While Ramaci worked to get Al-Khal out of Iraq, Al-Khal learned of a possible job with a former boss in Kurdistan. She stayed there a month, but the salary was so low that she couldn't survive on it, and she returned to Baghdad.

With no jobs in sight, Al-Khal flew to Jordan in December, 2005, and rented an apartment with another former USAID worker and, later, with Iraqi prostitutes. She started doing translation work from home. Ramaci sent money; so did Al-Khal's former boss. She still owes him \$15,000.

"I was alone most of the time," says Al-Khal. "I hated it because the Jordanians, they didn't treat Iraqis in a proper way." She was also frightened by the political climate.

"I felt most of the time I have to stay in my apartment so I don't give the police a chance to chase me, to deport me. The atmosphere between Iraqis and Jordanians is so tense."

Jordanians liked Saddam Hussein because he supplied them with subsidized oil and other commodities for low prices, Al-Khal says. Now, they blame Iraqis for toppling him. "They ask very sectarian questions: Are you Sunni? Are you Shia? Did you support Saddam? What was your position on Saddam?"

Ramaci tried to get Al-Khal into Egypt through an acquaintance at the Christian Science Monitor. When that failed, she talked to the State Department about bringing Al-Khal to the United States. The department told her that Al-Khal didn't qualify for asylum because Iraq was now a democracy, so there was no reason to flee.

"Many people in the US government, and Congress as well, think that these people need to go back to Iraq," says Kathleen Newland of the Migration Policy Institute. She says the belief in Washington is that "We've invested so much in safe, stable democratization and people should go back."

That perspective may change if there's all-out civil war hits Iraq, but "nobody wants to go there at this point."

If legally, Iraqi refugees are suspect, politically, they are a sign of a losing battle. Former Secretary of State for Refugee Affairs, Arthur E. Dewey, explained the problem early on in a Boston Globe op-ed. "For political reasons, the administration will discourage" the resettlement of Iraqi refugees in the United States "because of the psychological message it would send, that it is a losing cause."

That helps explain the lack of political will from the White House and Congress, says Director of Migration Policy Institute Muzaffar Chishti, a lawyer at NYU Law

School who focuses on labor and immigration. "They were just chintzy, to be blunt, about how many Iraqis we wanted to take. We were never going to allow a huge number of Iraqis to come in because the numbers would've been overwhelming." And since the US is in charge there, says Chishti, large-scale emigration would be tantamount to admitting that the situation was not under control. "It was politically complicated."

Al-Khal tried to get an appointment at the American embassy in Jordan but was refused; the embassy there told her that it didn't see Iraqis. She was so afraid to go to the UNHCR that she delayed applying for refugee status, worried that someone in the long lines of Iraqis standing outside might recognize her. "I didn't dare to go. I was afraid to get out of my apartment. My picture, my story was on the Internet." Two years after Al-Khal moved to Jordan, Ramaci finally procured her an appointment so that she wouldn't have to stand in line.

Refugee on Arrival: A Story from the Afterlife

Mohammad Al-Karkhi finally arrived from Iraq in early June. So far, the IRC is paying for his apartment, food stamps, a phone and electricity, and sending a monthly check for \$520. He has four weeks left to find a job and become self-sufficient before that support stops.

That's part of the "self-help" philosophy among American refugee organizations. "Funding in the US is very geared towards self-sufficiency," says Brookes. Each refugee admitted to the United States receives roughly \$500 from the State Department for his first month here. After that, some, like Al-Karkhi, may receive additional funding for another three months through a match grant, distributed via a resettlement agency.

"The State Department allocates only a certain number of slots," for match grants says IRC caseworker Debbie Krause, who's been working with Mohammad, "and we don't have enough slots for every refugee we're assisting. So we have to make decisions." The match grants are intended to assist those deemed especially employable in the US, who thus may need only a few months of assistance while they get on their feet. Others, unable to find work, end up on welfare.

Happy to finally be in New York, Al-Karkhi is worried about next steps. He is well educated, and his demure wife and exceedingly well-behaved kids seem instantly out of place in their rundown Bronx building.

"He's just a very sweet guy," say Al-Karkhi's sponsor, former NBC editor Marc Kusnetz. He had used Al-Karkhi as a fixer for a story two years earlier and started working on the case after Al-Karkhi emailed him, though they'd never met. "Until he got off the plane at JFK, I'd never laid eyes on the man. I was thrilled, gratified."

It was Kusnetz who first delivered the news to Al-Karkhi that he would be able to come to the States. It was 1:30 am Damascus time. "He says 'I'm sorry' because he knows the time," Al-Karkhi recalls. "I say 'I'm not sleeping,' because you know, no job, thinking, so we were awake, me and Alaa." The lease on his Syrian apartment had just expired.

"I have something to [tell] you. Are you ready?" Kusnetz said.

"What, Marc?"

"Don't do anything, Mohammad. Just sit. You're gonna leave on June 2nd."

Mohammad was shocked. "Marc, are you sure?"

"Yeah, Mohammad, I'm sure."

"I told Alaa, and she was crying and shouting." He smiles, sounding elated, as though he'd just been given the happy news again. They woke their eldest daughter, Mais, who also started to cry at the news and awakened her two younger siblings to tell them. "They were jumping on the bed, shouting."

Now, the IRC is assisting him with a job hunt. He wants to work in the media hopes to find a job commensurate with his professional experience. "They know about my qualifications," he says of the IRC.

Al-Karkhi would eventually like to return to school and then practice journalism, but he's worried about his savings evaporating. Since his move to New York, he's had to spend his own money for such daily necessities as kitchen utensils and an air conditioner. "We had to buy things. We came just carrying our bags."

The \$520 is not enough to live on, he says. The check he received on July 1st for the month was spent in two weeks.

The biggest issue, say Brookes at the IRC, is that Iraqi refugees are "a population of well-educated people" with expectations about the kinds of jobs they can acquire. "The challenge is to try to encourage a family to become self-sufficient, but often they don't want to take just any kind of job."

Two long months after his arrival, Al-Karkhi is finally meeting with Heidi Gauthier at the IRC's employment office in midtown to discuss job options. Till now, he's been dropping in frequently on his caseworker Debbie Krause and job searching on websites, helped by friends and an organization called Upwardly Global that works with immigrants.

Gauthier is upbeat and warm as she leads Al-Karkhi past a row of offices where a team of researchers and interns work to find employment for recent refugees and asylees. Most of the refugees they assist lack Al-Karkhi's language skills Gauthier says, so they're usually placed as dishwashers or cooks. The employment office has far more contacts for those kinds of jobs than those Al-Karkhi would be qualified for. A sign for a \$10 an hour job at a "busy NYC falafel restaurant" in Greenwich Village hangs on the bulletin board in her small office.

"As far as contacts with the New York Times, we don't have them," Gauthier explains to Al-Khal. Still, she thinks Al-Karkhi can find satisfying work. She quickly jots down his skills on his match grant application below his desired job, "Journalist":

- Advanced degree
- Excellent command of English
- Many years of experience

All this, along with the number of family dependents and other financial information, will be fed into a database that will then produce Al-Karkhi's "self-sufficiency number." That number is calculated on a 40 hour work week at minimum wage—a low bar, say Gauthier, since it's questionable how self-sufficient anyone can be on minimum wage in New York City.

Al-Karkhi, spotlessly dressed as ever in blue pants and a striped shirt, is quiet, his stress palpable. He has grown increasingly depressed. His former employer, NBC, "so far has not stepped up to the plate, disappointingly," says Krause. "Essentially, he put his life in danger for them." Krause, who has worked for CBS and NBC herself, can't believe that

strings can't be pulled. "US networks are very fond of showing feel good stories. But getting him out is one thing, but now he needs a job. He's got a family of five."

Al-Karkhi has had one interview at NBC, and his sponsor, Marc Kusnetz, has been in talks with the network. A former NBC editor himself, he says, "NBC has been receptive," but "it's a grindingly slow process." NBC bears a responsibility for helping Al-Karkhi, he says, but it's also important to consider that Iraqi employees of western news organizations are earning a living. "They have a job...They walked into a situation with their eyes open."

Still, given that the consequence of their jobs was that "their lives are drastically altered," news organization have an obligation to their former employees, Kusnetz says. "There is some karmic balancing-out."

Those involved with al-Karkhi's case at NBC were unavailable for comment at the time of publication of this article.

Al-Karkhi wants to make sure Gauthier understands his position. "So far nothing, I get nothing. I applied for many jobs." He recounts his time in Syria without work. "I'm exhausted from all this."

Gauthier explains her method. "I know New York is big into the networking," she says. "You have to know someone to get somewhere, but if that isn't working for you, you gotta go to the next thing." It's a three-pronged approach. Al-Karkhi has already been networking at NBC. "The next thing we need to do is hit the Internet hard, figure out where they're hiring, send out your application." If that doesn't work, Gauthier says, they'll move to the second tier of job options.

"I'm not above walking with people to interviews." Gauthier reassures Al-Karkhi.
"Let's go meet these people. Let's figure it out. I'm willing to work 110 percent with you to get you what you need and what you want."

They discuss the tax code and how to use Craigslist. And then they start to look for jobs.

"Let's start with jobs you're not willing to do," says Gauthier.

Al-Karkhi considers the question. "There are a lot of things."

"Ok, how about cooking?"

"No."

"Ok, cooking is off the table."

Gauthier reads aloud an advertising position posted on Craigslist. People come with a mass of skills, she says, and sometimes, they don't realize that they could be qualified for other things. She asks him to consider the job. "You'd be working with people to come up with ways to promote products. Journalism, advertising, are all kind of the same thing."

Al-Karkhi is less convinced about his ability to find a suitable position. He inquires about factory jobs, but Gauthier discourages him. "What we have is \$7.15 an hour. Let's give this another two, three weeks. Let's look for something with your skills."

She continues scrolling through Craigslist. "Ah, I think I found something!" She scans the computer screen quickly.

"No," her voice flattens. "It's the Army. I don't think you wanna talk to the Army."

After Arrival

While "Iraqis are highly educated," says Chishti, they have no family connections here. Many have been resettled in areas they didn't choose, so while some have an easy time establishing connections in Dearborn, Michigan, home to the nation's largest Arab community, others may have more trouble elsewhere. So, even if they manage to get to the US, they face a host of new issues. "The significant challenge," says Chishti, "is integrating into the labor market."

Many refugees feel that since what happened to Iraq resulted from the US invasion, they ought to receive help, says Krause. "I'm telling engineers, professors...our American graduates are having trouble finding jobs," but "they say we're not interested in the problems of Americans."

But compared to the "completely laissez-faire attitude towards [other] immigrants," says Chishti, refugees receive a "pretty extensive government hand." The private sector that has a big role to play here, he argues, and not only for strategic reasons. "It'll be almost immoral not help people who've taken a real risk."

Al-Khal had the advantage of being able to move in with her former employer's wife, lessening her financial troubles. But job search only ended after an immigration advocate, whose father owns a real estate firm, asked him take Al-Khal as an employee. That personal connection was what landed her an office assistant position last November. She's also started to learn graphic design on her own, and she translates on the side. She's moved to her own place in Canarsie, Brooklyn, but Ramaci never asked her to return her keys; it's Ramaci's apartment that Al-Khal still calls home.

Ramaci and Al-Khal are standing in the packed kitchen of Ramaci's apartment. It's late evening. Ramaci offers Al-Khal ice cream. They are standing in front of the fridge, freezer door open, and Al-Khal can't seem to decide on a flavor. "Well, what do you want?" Ramaci pushes. Al-Khal smiles mischievously. "I want everything."

Postscript

I found my first character closer than I thought. I'd begun looking by contacting NGO's like Human Rights Watch and the International Rescue Committee asking them about the issue of Iraqi refugees and whether they could connect me with any. They were surprisingly helpful with information and interviews, returning my calls and emails pretty quickly, but declined to connect me with refugees they knew. It's sensitive subject and protocol prohibits organizations from revealing the identities of the people they're working with. I'm also a member of some Arab listserves and when an argument broke out on one of them about whether the Iraqi refugees that had worked with the United States were collaborators in an occupation and invasion, I began contacting the participants of the debate individually. That put me in touch with some older Iraqi immigrants who'd come before this war. It was helpful on background and context but no characters. I also knew a friend had contacts to a New York based Iraqi journalist, Alaa Majeed and I contacted her through him. She spoke to several Iraqis on my behalf but as they were still in the midst of their immigration process, they were afraid to talk. Finally, another friend mentioned that a recent Columbia graduate was an Iraqi refugee. That's how I found Abdulla Mizead.

Finding my second character was accidental. As it turns out, many of the Iraqis that are now refugees, were journalists in Iraq who worked with US based news organizations. I happened to mention this to Bill Wheatley at the Journalism School. He put me in touch with Marc Kusnetz, and that's how I met Mohammad Al-Karkhi.

I found Nour Al-Khal by researching the local New York coverage of the story. She was profiled in a New York Post piece. I'd kept in touch with the Iraqi journalist, Alaa Majeed, and I asked her for Al-Khal's contact information. She connected me with someone else and, through a chain, I got to Al-Khal.

Though, I'd managed to convince them all to work with me, keeping in regular touch was another matter. Al-Karkhi was the easiest. He was new in New York having just arrived a month earlier and he was looking for contacts, networks, friends himself. Mizead was in the middle of finding a job and moving and hesitant about having me follow him around. Al-Khal was more than willing, but it took some regular phone calls to get her to return my calls. She rescheduled our first interview a few times.

Unlike previous similar issues like refugees from the Vietnam war, the situation is comparatively well-documented. But, the figures and statistics sometimes vary and it's important to understand the methods by which various organizations came up with their data. That was a lot of back and forth with human rights organizations and others to try and understand that process. For instance, the State Department will tell you that it's given the largest sum of money for aid. Well, that's true except that the need in this situation—arguably the responsibility of the US because of the war—is greater than ever before. In other words, it is an extraordinary situation. And the money is a fraction compared with the figure spent on the war. That kind of context, embedded in the statistics was hard to understand, but important because it goes beyond quotes by opposing sources and says something factual about where priorities lie. The State Department, however, was surprisingly, fairly prompt about returning my calls.

In this case—and I think, it will be true for several stories—definitions of apparently simple concepts are key. For instance, the term "refugee". Broadly speaking, the vernacular definition is someone who's fled his/her country and that's the concept I've used here to pull my characters. Legally however, there was no international Refugee Convention till 1951 and who the US has considered a refugee has shifted over the years, which has bearing on the statistics, particularly comparing the influx of refugees over the years. In the 1980s, those fleeing communism were considered refugees. Today, that definition is obsolete. The legal definition today is a person who's fled from their home to a second host country while s/he awaits entry in the country of their final destination. Anyone else who comes straight to the final destination, like Mizead, and then applies for refugee status is known as an asylee. These definitions come into play when deciding who your characters will be and how to structure the narrative.

On the whole, the process was a mixture of research and accident.

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Source List

1. Makenzie Brookes
International Rescue Committee (IRC)
212.551.0975
Mackenzie.Brookes@theirc.org
2. Nathaniel Hurd
International Rescue Committee (IRC)
202.822.0166 x45
Nathaniel.Hurd@theirc.org
3. Elissa Mittman
International Rescue Committee (IRC)
work: 212.551.0966
cell: 646.691.4211
Elissa.Mittman@theirc.org
4. Debbie Krause
International Rescue Committee (IRC)
212.551.3156
5. Danielle Coon
International Rescue Committee (IRC)
212.551.2732
6. Heidi Gauthier
International Rescue Committee (IRC)
Employment Specialist
(212) 551-3171
heidi.gauthier@theIRC.org
7. Elizabeth Harris
State Department, Refugee Affairs
202.663.1050
8. State Official (name withheld on request)
State Department, Refugee Affairs
202.663.1050
9. Muzaffar Chishti
Migration Policy Institute
Director, MPI Office at NYU School of Law

Muzaffar.Chishti@nyu.edu
212.992.8844

10. Kathleen Newland
Migration Policy Institute
Director of Migrants, Migration, and Development and Refugee Protection
Programs, and Member of the Board of Trustees
knewland@migrationpolicy.org
General Phone: 202-266-1940
Office Phone: 202.266.1903
11. Ruthie Epstein
Lifeline for Iraqi Refugees –Human Rights First
212. 845.5200
12. Amelia Templeton
Lifeline for Iraqi Refugees –Human Rights First
202. 547.5692
13. Alaa Majeed
Iraqi journalist in New York
917.459.5977
alaa.majeed@gmail.com
14. Marc Kusnetz
Mohammad Al-Karkhi's sponsor
mkusnetz@nyc.rr.com
212.647.9727
15. Lisa Ramaci
Nour Al-Khal's sponsor
212.598.4993
16. Nour Al-Khal
917.674.8353
nouralkhal@yahoo.com
17. Mohammad Al-Karkhi
Home: 718.733.6505
Cell: 347.279.1238
muhammed190@yahoo.com
18. Abdulla Mizead
abdulla.mizead@yahoo.com
347.419.3198