

U.S. Bars Iraqi Refugees Despite Perils

After a relative working for the U.S. was killed, the Atabbi's of Des Plaines tried to bring survivors here, but the door was slammed shut.

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Whenever Taseen Atabbi's sister called from Baghdad, fretting about the dangers she and her four children faced, her brother would update her on progress he was making in bringing her to the U.S.

Not any more.

"I cannot give them hope until I have something in my hand," said Atabbi, a 54-year-old furniture store sales manager from north suburban Des Plaines, whose brother-in-law was killed in Iraq by insurgents.

Even though Atabbi's brother-in-law was killed because of his work for the U.S. military, Atabbi has been unable to make progress on getting his relatives out of Iraq and into the U.S.

The U.S. has, in fact, closed the door to Iraqis eager to flee by refusing since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks to accept Iraqi refugees, according to officials with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

"We can refer cases to other countries, but not the U.S.," said Larry Yungk, an official in Washington for the agency, which had been the major doorkeeper for Iraqi refugees hoping to come to the U.S.

U.S. officials say they will open the door again, albeit for a limited number of refugees. Government immigration workers were recently dispatched to several Middle East cities to interview up to 300 Iraqis who had been approved as refugees, but whose travel to the U.S. was canceled after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Government officials also say a handful of Iraqis whose lives were threatened because of their ties to the U.S. already have been allowed to enter the U.S. in the last two years.

"We are beginning to look at ways to open the process," said Bill Strassberger, a spokesman for Citizenship and Immigration Services in Washington, D.C. The agency is part of the Homeland Security Department.

After Sept. 11, the U.S. temporarily stopped accepting refugees worldwide in order to review its screening process. But the hold has remained for Iraqis because of concerns about terrorists trying to enter as refugees, and the safety of U.S. immigration officials in Iraq, government officials explained.

"We certainly have been concerned about individuals, who have been of great assistance to the U.S.," said a U.S. official in Washington, who asked not to be named.

Iraqis clamoring for refugee status are mostly people like Atabbi's sister, people who fear for their lives because of their links to the U.S. effort in Iraq. Others are members of religious minority groups who complain about increased attacks or are people who have suffered from the chaos that afflicts much of the nation.

"For some minorities the situation now is even more dangerous than it was under Saddam [Hussein] because of the lack of authority," said Robert Esbrook, head of asylum for the citizenship bureau's office in Chicago.

That is a major reason why 70 percent of the 27 applications for asylum filed by Iraqis already in the United States were approved in the region in the last three months, he said. Normally, only one out of four asylum applications are approved in the region, he said.

Worries in Detroit too

In suburban Detroit, a common concern at the Iraqi American Center is the plight of Iraqis who cannot get out of the country. Like Chicago, the Detroit area has a large Iraqi population.

Though the center serves all Iraqis, many clients are Iraqi Christians whose relatives' safety in Iraq is precarious.

"People are suffering not less than before despite the historic change," said Dunya Mikhail, the

center's director, who said she has a relative in Iraq who paid \$80,000 in ransom to kidnapers for his freedom.

"He is in a very traumatic situation. He is always scared," she said about her relative, who would like to come to the U.S.

Since gunmen killed her brother in January, Lina Sawah has been trying to get her widowed sister-in-law and four nieces and nephews out of Iraq and into America.

Sawah's brother, a liquor store owner, was killed as he was closing his Baghdad shop for the night. She learned of the attack in a midnight call to her home in suburban Lincolnwood. A brother living in Germany explained what had happened.

"I told him many times, 'Close the store,'" Sawah said. "He didn't listen to me."

Sawah, 27, migrated to Chicago from Baghdad eight years ago. She spoke to a lawyer in Jordan hired by her husband years ago to help her sister-in-law immigrate. But the lawyer told her the widow and children would have to travel to Jordan to apply for visas through the U.S. Embassy there.

Sawah downloaded Citizenship and Immigration Services family reunification applications but a call to an agency representative gave her pause.

"She told me it could take 10 years," Sawah said. "I don't know where to go."

Her sister-in-law, meanwhile, is selling the family furniture in Baghdad and plans to take the children to Amman, Jordan's capital, where she hopes to apply for a visa through the U.S. Embassy.

Though this could be expensive, remaining in Iraq is a scarier option, Sawah said.

During a recent phone conversation with her sister-in-law in Baghdad, Sawah heard the blast of a car bomb. It blew the pictures off the walls of the sister-in-law's house.

Taseen Atabbi's brother-in-law, Mahmood Makki, who was trained as a tour guide, began working as a volunteer translator nearly two years ago for the U.S. military, earning only food for his family, according to documents from the U.S. military, and Titan Corp., a large military contractor.

But soon he was put on the payroll of the San Diego-based military contractor, which has more than 4,000 translators in Iraq.

"He [Makki] was targeted on numerous occasions and never stopped working because he felt very strong about assisting the soldiers and the rebuilding of Iraq," Ghaleb Mikel, a Titan Corp. manager, said in an e-mail from Baghdad last month.

After a bomb went off in his car in late 2003, Makki was hospitalized for several weeks. Last June, insurgents set off a bomb in his courtyard, damaging his house and injuring several family members, according to reports from the company and military officials.

Then last August, five men walked up to him, shook his hand, and shot him dead in front of his 15-year-old son and two older daughters. He was 46.

The attackers were not wearing masks, and the children clearly saw their faces, another reason their mother, Muntaha, 44, fears for their safety.

Leaving almost everything behind, the family fled their home and rented another. But the attackers soon tracked them down and threatened them. On the 100th day after Makki's killing, the attackers called his wife, according to Atabbi, and asked, "How do you feel after we killed your husband?"

They quickly moved to a relative's house and have tried to lay low. The son, who was injured during the attack on his father, rarely goes to school. After months without income, the wife, who is a middle school English teacher, only recently went back to work.

Lawyer's verdict: 'Hopeless'

At first, Atabbi consulted with a lawyer, who termed the family's situation "hopeless," saying it would take years to bring them over through the normal immigration process that unifies families.

He sought advice at his mosque in Northbrook and linked up with the Heartland Alliance's Midwest Immigrant and Human Rights Center, which has helped him search for solutions.

U.S. Rep. Jan **Schakowsky's** office, which has tried to help others with similar problems, has raised the family's case with immigration officials. So, far, the government's response is that "the U.S. is not allowing Iraqi refugees into the U.S.," according to Nadeam Elshami, a spokesman for Schakowsky, an Illinois Democrat.

Meanwhile, Atabbi searches the Internet endlessly, hoping to discover an answer, and calls Iraqi friends and relatives here and there, asking whether they have any suggestions.

"I'm trying to do my best," he said.