Iraqi Exiles Find New Lives in Bay Area, Reflect on War’s Cost
By Huda Ahmed

Mustafa Abbas and Karrar Hashim are both 25 year-old Iraqi war refugees living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Abbas is a tall and physically well-built man with a full oval, clean-shaven face and dark hair. Hashim is thin and of medium height, with brown skin, a boyish face and long thick eyelashes that make it difficult to tell his age. The men are many miles removed from their homeland and the comfort of friends and family and are among an estimated 19,910 Iraqi exiles and immigrants who have moved to the U.S. in recent years.

They arrived separately in this country in 2009, six years after the U.S. invasion of their homeland. They held similar jobs back home after the war’s start, working for the U.S. Army as cooks and translators in military camps in Baghdad. They both traveled to the United States for essentially the same reasons – forced by threats against their lives from insurgent groups for aiding the Americans. Today they live in a shared apartment in a rough section of Antioch, CA., where street violence and drug-related crime are not uncommon.

While finding safe haven from the war, the two men also share a deep affection and admiration for the U.S. Army, and many things about the American way of life. They also belong to the same Islamic religious sect, the Shiite.

But in many ways Abbas and Hashim are very different men, having sharply contrasting views about everything from the war to the role of women in modern societies. Abbas, who works as a maintenance employee at a golf course in Antioch, and Hashim, a painter and artist by training who found a job as a warehouse worker in a Goodwill store, spent time recently with Huda Ahmed, an Iraqi journalist, discussing their lives here and in Iraq and their dreams for the future. They spoke to her over four interview sessions lasting several hours. Ahmed, a student at Berkeley’s graduate school of journalism, translated the transcript into English from their native Arabic. The interviews with these two young men, whose stories represent a
microcosm of the Iraqi Diaspora, are condensed and edited for clarity.

Question: What kind of threats did you and your families get in Iraq?

Hashim: The threats were oral beside the fear I lived in doing our work. I lived in the base more than I did in my home. When I worked for the U.S. Army base, I only visited my family four to six days a month. My life transformed while working at the camp because I began to imitate everything the American soldiers said or wore. When I went to my family, I felt afraid that someone might be watching me. Sometimes I forgot and spoke English words or wore western clothes like sport shoes and baggy pants that only translators wear. The last straw was when my friend told me that someone asked him if I could teach him some English because he heard me speaking good English and asked if I worked with the American army. At that moment I made up my mind that there is no safe place for me here anymore.

Abbas: I got written and oral threats. At first my family thought it was against my brother because he was a policeman. Later I noticed that they were directed to me, mentioning my work with the American forces and accusing me of being a traitor and a spy agent for the American army. Some people from my neighborhood began to ask me if I worked for the American army and what did I do. I replied with negatives and told them that I work with the Iraqi army. I began to see strangers watching my routine schedule wherever I went. I tried to hide it from my family because I was worried that this would hurt my mother and I didn't want her to suffer. So I made up my mind and finally told my family the truth after I got my American visa.

Both Hashim and Abbas worked together for two years in the U.S. army base in Baghdad and that is when they became close friends. They came to the U.S. separately within a short period. Hashim arrived in the United States in September 2009 and Abbas arrived in October 2009. The two decided they would stick together and help each other as new immigrants in a strange land. They were able to enter the United States through a SIV (Special Immigration Visa) program for Iraqis working with the American army.
Hashim: We didn't want the IOM (International Organization of Immigration) to choose the city fearing they would throw me into a dangerous place with little job chances. So I applied for the SIV. I checked with my American colleagues in Baghdad about which states have jobs, good climate, Arab populations and no discrimination. California seemed to be the best place. Abbas and I agreed to stay in touch, no matter who arrived first, and to help each other.

Q: Seven years have passed since the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Do you think the invasion was worth it? Is Iraq a better place today, and are the people freer and more hopeful about their future?

Hashim: I think that the U.S. should have liberated Iraq a long time ago. I think it was a great idea and it is worth it. The Iraqi people didn't have any hope of living a better life before, but now they do.

Abbas: Well, I don't support any war, anywhere. No, it wasn't a good idea because not only Saddam was the target. A lot of innocent people got killed.

Q: In some ways the security situation was worse after the war than before. What did the Iraqi people gain, when you add up all the pluses and minuses of the war?

Hashim: I think people in Iraq don't practice their daily lives in so much fear now as they did when Saddam was in power. But there are no rules or laws, because the government is still weak and corrupt. We are missing the right people in the right positions of authority. I believe now, if we put the right people in the right position, Iraq will get better in a very short period.

Abbas: People used to get killed during Saddam's regime and now there are more people dying than before. It's war and every war has casualties. So what I say is that many people died and many got their freedom. From my own selfish point of view, I'm happy that I got a Green Card and a good job here in the U.S.

Q: Iraqis took part in an important election recently to pick new Parliamentary representation.
Iraqi ex-patriots around the world also had the right to vote, too. Did you vote?

Hashim: No, I did not vote. Because of the problems I mentioned which will not be fixed by any of our leaders today. I did not believe in any of them. I felt voting would be a fruitless exercise.

Abbas: I wish I did, but I did not because I was very busy lately. I know my family voted for the Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki. But I don't like the politicians there at all. I'm tired of all this.

Q: What do you think about the election results? [This question was asked right after the election but before the final results were known. Al-Maliki lost with narrow margin against his secular rival, the former interim president in 2004, Ayad Allawi.]

Hashim: If it's Ayad Allawi, then it is a good omen and that is really good. He is secular and not religious and this is the most important because I do not follow any religious movement. The Iraqi people tried the religious leaders and politicians and so far they did not do anything for the country except bring sectarianism and bloodshed. And now the people chose Allawi because there is no use of putting the religious leaders in power. I don't have a TV and I don't care who wins because I don't think there is anything going to change. My question: Will Allawi be able to make Iraq like America? I don't know. It's very hard because of our culture. We don't comprehend women's freedom and it may take years to change.

Abbas: I didn't watch it either and I don't care who wins. Even if the prime minister is secular, it doesn't change anything. He will be hostage to different religious and political factions who are against any secular society. All we have now is war because of religious differences, so it's harming us more than helping.

Q: The Obama administration seems to be sticking closely to a timetable for bringing the U.S. troops back home. There are now 115,000 troops on the ground there as of November 30, 2009, compared to 180,000 soldiers at the height of the war and occupation. The U.S. Administration hopes to bring the vast majority of troops back to the U.S. by the end of 2011.
What do you think about the U.S. troops leaving Iraq?

Hashim: They are going to make a big mistake by leaving Iraq to its own people. Iraqi people believe in rumors, for example. I hear all these rumors and conspiracy theories about American soldiers that have no basis in reality. There’s one rumor for example that American soldiers are planting IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) on the roads as a technique to prolong the violence and extend their stay in Iraq, so they can continue to control the country and our natural resources. The people believe it without investigating the truth. They don’t know what the Americans are doing to help Iraq. Iraqis are still not educated enough to know who they are voting for. When the Americans leave Iraq there will be lots of weapons in the hands of a corrupt government and corrupt political parties. That is not a formula for peace and development. The Americans are leaving Iraq with an army that is not ready yet to take over. The Iraqi Army is not ready to protect Iraqis. For example, I know of an Intelligence Battalion has more than 200 soldiers who can’t write and read. What kind of army has soldiers who cannot write and read in the Intelligence Battalion? If we did not have American troops, we would have a civil war. And I’m afraid that will happen when they leave.

Abbas: I’m against the American presence in Iraq. It’s much better if they leave. We need our own government to take over and fix our problems. Outsiders can’t fix it for us. What American soldiers do, Iraqi soldiers can do. It’s just a matter of time.

Q: Do you think the Iraqi army will be able to protect the country after the U.S. troops leave?

Hashim: The Iraqi army’s equipment is not good enough, and they are not secure or strong enough to take over. The American government can do something about that if we can get rid of the corrupt people from the Iraqi army. The Army is the most important organization now. But the Army is being controlled by the politicians and the parties’ leaders there. Look at the soldiers’ lives, the barracks they are living in. If we make the soldiers lives better it can change something, but not a lot is being done about this. Our army is infiltrated by the militias who are intent on pursuing their own interests. The army is in some ways split just as much as the country.
who wear it but they have bad manners. At the same time, I know many girls without hijab who behave much better than women with one. To me, it is a matter of ethics not of clothes.

Abbas: I believe the hijab looks very nice on the woman and it is good for her. But I do not like to force it on the woman because I want her to be convinced to wear it. Besides, it is mentioned in the Holy Qur'an but every Muslim interprets it the way he/she likes it. It depends on who wears it. Hijab is not a decoration like anything else. For me it is just a barrier between woman and man. There are women who can enforce their respect whether they wear hijab or not. She should not give herself away to the man fast. We are governed by society's ethics and traditions. For example, my family lives in a conservative area in Baghdad so if I have a wife, I would have her wear hijab, otherwise she would be singled out. It is a matter of respect.

Q: In Iraq, men and women live largely separate lives, due to Islamic prohibitions about mixing of men and women in places like schools and mosques. As you look back on Iraq from your new vantage in America, do you think there should be mixed schools?

Hashim: I support the idea of mixed gender schools because I saw the reality in Iraq. The young man feels that the university is a place for romance more than for study, and that is the first thing he/she would think of in the first year, is how to love, mix and have more freedom. The university is the only place for people to get mixed, and I think it is generally a good thing.

Abbas (vehemently disagreeing): No, I do not agree with Hashim, because it is very dangerous age, for people are too young to control themselves especially during middle and high school stages. It’s wrong, and they will want to use the opportunity of school only for sex. Then the government should be prepared and have a birth hospital next to school. It’s true that it is a good idea in principle, but not in Iraq. Men cannot control themselves when they are around women. You know what happens in colleges in Iraq. I mean I will go for sex if I see the girl is easy, and that effort and energy takes away from what school should be about – education.
Q: Last year there was major controversy in Iraq over killings of homosexuals; for instance more than 90 gay men have been killed by Shiite militias in Iraq in 2009 according to the Human Rights Watch Organization. Many Muslims view homosexuality as an abomination. Now that you have experienced life in the U.S., what do you think about gays? Would you befriend them here in the U.S.?

Hashim (laughing hard and turning his face away and then staring at his friend Abbas and me): If I say yes my own people will say I'm gay too. I'm against any killings and you cannot ignore them, I accept the existence of gays in Iraq because they are human. Frankly I hope I can find a solution for the gays even in the Holy Qur'an but I never found it. I don't think I can be a friend to gays. They certainly have a right to peace and life, and I think it's terribly that they are treated badly in Iraq. At the same time, I couldn't befriend one either in Iraq or in the U.S.; because people would think I am gay, too.

Abbas (hiding a laugh under his arm, and answering while staring at the floor.): I couldn't accept gays back home but when I came to the U.S. I decided that I would deal with anyone who is different, just like anybody else. Gay practices and lifestyles are not acceptable in our country and I'm against their marriage, but in the U.S. I don't really care if they do whatever they want to do.

Q: How did you try to overcome your boredom of being jobless, until you got a job? What did you do?

Hashim: I was afraid what should I do if I didn't get a job. I did not know the titles of jobs and duties and responsibilities and so on. Life is hard and I know that, but the difference is that there, in Iraq, you can stay with anyone, but here in the U.S. your friend cannot keep you for long time because of financial and other matters.

Abbas: I cannot say anything because I just got here few months ago and it takes time until I settle down. When I compare myself with a friend in Iraq and here, I would say I'm much better off than him. I tried to recruit to the American army even in San Francisco and they said...
it is very hard and even for schools it takes a lot of time. I understand that I have to work very hard to get a job. I know it is a very hard period, but my family have great expectations of me.

Q: Why do you want to work for the U.S. army here? Don't you want to look for a peaceful job?

Abbas: I want to work and I want to work in the army here. My Iraqi friends ask me why I want to work in the army for low wages less than other jobs. I tell them that army means family to me. I want to belong to a place like I used to back home. When I was in Iraq I was with my family and my job. It meant stability to me, in spite of the danger and death threats, but at least I was with my family. In some ways in America I feel like a disabled person. I mean there is progress and hope in my life that there will be some light and I thank God for everything. Otherwise if I surrender to despair, then you will see me hanging myself next day from the balcony. I will never do that, of course (laughing). I know I came here and no one threatens me or talks to me, but I feel no stability, you do not know what to do in a new place.

On a recent weekend, Ahmed asked Hashim if he and Abbas would be available to continue the interview series. Hashim agreed and told her to wait for him at the BART station. Once she arrived and walked out to the BART parking lot, she saw Hashim who was waiting in his secondhand stick shift Volkswagen Golf, which he bought for $1,400 from a car dealer recently. “I have no idea how to get out of here, let’s see,” he said.

Ahmed: “But you have the GPS, why don’t you use it?”

Hashim: I do not like it because it makes me feel ignorant not to know the streets by heart as we used to do back home. I don't want to rely on the GPS, I want to enjoy learning my whereabouts. OK, here we go.

It took him two circles around the lot to figure out the exit to the highway. Hip-hop music was coming from the car CD player. As they drove the highway, Hashim sighed: “I don’t like it here (Antioch), it is so quiet and I’m used to noisy busy city type. I’m actually looking for a job in
another city so I can move out. I'm so far from my friends who live in Berkeley and Oakland. They joke around and tell me that I live in the countryside. I began to call Antioch "the city of old people."

They arrived at his complex just right off the highway on Wilbur Avenue, at the intersection of a traffic light where there is a line of stores, real estate, fast food restaurants, convenience store, car accessories, car wash, and bank offices. The apartment overlooks a suburban neighborhood and a big yard of old cars.

As they settled inside the apartment, Hashim offered his visitor an Iraqi meal he cooked himself, plain white rice and burned white bean broth. He laughed and told his visitor he never cooked back home but he learned a little when he was working in the U.S. base. "You don't have to eat if you don't want to." She did however, because it would be considered an insult not to accept and smiled approvingly at the taste.

Q: How did you feel when you first arrived at the airport here in California?

Hashim: It was like a dream come true. I used to dream of traveling and living abroad. I wanted that because of the freedom that we do not have in Iraq. I know I cannot change a whole society because it is hard. I wasn't scared when I arrived at the San Francisco airport but my American friends in Iraq warned me not to reveal my Iraqi or Arab identity because of the 9/11[attacks].

Abbas: When I first came to San Francisco airport, the first three negative things came to my head is that I'm an Arab, second when I got into the airport, people were staring at me and I thought there was something wrong with me. But then I realized they were looking at everybody because they were waiting for their loved ones. Third is the education, because I'm starting from zero and I have no one here. I did not have any confidence in myself at first but now I do. Sometimes I avoid talking about religion because it is too soon to talk about that. We are still getting to know people here. They see an Arab from Muslim background and they look at us like we just came out of the cave. They cannot tell the difference which country we
come from. They would remember Iraq as a place of suicide bombers and terrorism, but for me I would remember the civilization, my family and my friends. For example, I have some neighbors here who came to me the other night and asked for a drink, I told them that I only have milk, and they laughed hard telling me that they need soda to mix it with whiskey and milk would not do. Those are the kinds of things I learn about America every day.

Q: Since you have been here in the United States for several months, have you felt homesick?

Hashim: No, I don’t. I feel more comfortable here than in Iraq. I feel I’m free to do whatever I want and walk or talk to whomever I want. Of course, I miss family and friends, but not Iraq as a land or a country. I miss some of the traditions and habits. For example, the meaning of friendship in Iraq is different from here. In Iraq, friendship is more intimate. It’s like brotherhood. I can go out with my friends whether I have money or not or a job or not. But here I have to pay attention to how I can save money. America is a very materialistic place. So I have to quit this habit of thinking about friendship here because it is difficult here. Even if you don’t have money, you can’t stay with a friend for a long time because of the material issues. Also I can trust my own country fellow more than the American because he can understands me once he looks into my eyes, unlike the American friend.

Abbas: I miss my neighborhood, my family and my friends. I miss walking with my friends at sunset in Abu Nu’was Street (a famous street in Baghdad named after a well-known medieval poet, running along the Tigris River and known for a string of fish restaurants and green parks). The first thing I missed is playing with my friends. We used to play computer games all the time like “Call of Duty” game and also soccer. I miss the trust between friends, which I did not find here.

The men took a little break to sip Iraqi tea style, and smoke a cigarette. Hashim laughed: “I should quit smoking; it’s going to kill me, rather than the war.”

Q: Do you like American food?
Abbas: Of course, I miss Iraqi food but I like to eat pizza, lasagna, noodles with chicken but I do not like fast foods, because these chains of fast food look all the same to me.

Hashim: I like fast food like McDonalds, donuts and the desserts, and Starbucks Coffee.

Q: What about music?

Hashim: I like rap especially political rap and hi-hop.

Abbas: I like rock n' roll and pop. I don't like hip-hop or anything like that.

Q: Is there a mosque in Antioch, and do you go to it?

Hashim: I heard that there is a mosque here but I have never been there. I don't need to go to a mosque to know or meet people. I do not care if there is mosque or not because I'm not a religious person. I have never been to a mosque. I used to pray because my family used to force me to pray when I was a child. Later on when I grew up, I reached a stage that I felt religion is like a dictatorship because it would force thoughts on your head and make you forget other things like good deeds. I became an atheist after I had been under pressure, and I began to wonder why is it wrong to look at women or listen to music or having sex or drinking alcohol – all of these became big questions in my head. I used to watch over my shoulder when I go into a bar in Baghdad so my father's friends would not see me drinking. Now, I'm here, I'm free to drink and do whatever I want.

Abbas: I do not know if there is a mosque in Antioch or not, maybe there is one. I'm not interested, it's does not mean that because I'm a Muslim that I have to live near a mosque. I don't need to go to the mosque to pray because I can pray anywhere I want as long it is a pure place. But I went with some American friends to a church once or twice and the service addressed the same things I already know like faith, mercy and generosity. It was a nice experience. Actually, I used to pray before, but now it became hard and I became lazy. When I
was in Iraq, I used to dream of good jobs, girls, and booze to bring me happiness in the U.S. I said to myself that this is the first thing I would do. But when I got here, I realized it was false.

Q: Do you watch movies and do you meet with girls or have a girlfriend now in the U.S. or in Iraq?

Hashim: I like to watch science, and action movies that are based on true stories. I don't like horror movies. I went to the movies with an African American friend who works with me at the Goodwill Store. When I met her at work, I introduced myself and I talked with her. Later we agreed to go out. We wanted to know each other better so we went for dinner after the movie. We may go out again next week and this time she plans to teach me bowling. I do not know if she likes me or not but I feel she wants to know more about me.

Abbas: I like movies but we don't have a TV. There are girls at work and with friends, but I'm not yet prepared for a serious relationship. There is such an idea of a relationship in my mind, but I don't want to talk about it yet. I'm looking for the suitable person and would like to be with someone who understands me, because I don't want to waste my time and play around here and there.

Q: Are you thinking of getting married?

Hashim: Yes, of course. I would like to marry an Arab woman so we speak the same language. I want to speak my mother language to express more. And I would like to take my children to Iraq someday, and they should learn the Arabic language.

Abbas: I don't have preferences, it depends where I live. For example, if I live in an Arab region I may marry an Arab or an Iraqi, and if I'm in America, then I may marry an American. I did not decide yet, but the most important thing to me is that she can handle my life and my situation wherever I live. Religion isn't important to me.

After these interviews were completed, Hashim got a new job at Macy's in Palo Alto, California, and he is still dating his American friend. He and Abbas continue to face
challenges that stem from being uprooted from their homeland and transplanted to a vastly different culture. They remain close, demonstrating that two people can hold divergent views on politics, religion and social values and live together, support each other and remain best friends, a quality that crosses all cultural boundaries.

By: Fadil Ahmed at Hammi.

Books


Articles


Allam, Hannah. "Results of Iraq elections may take six months to see". McClatchy Newspapers; March 10, 2010