



Interview with Mr. Gabe Kadell, Refugee Relocation Specialist: “New Faces in a Different Land”

Michael Mylrea

War refugees have many faces and stories that the media tends to miss. While the news focuses on images of conflict and violence, it glosses over the fate of refugees who are forced to flee and start their lives over in completely foreign lands. Fearing the threat of violence, millions of Iraqis were forced or chose to flee from their homes to Jordan and Syria.

Following an international and domestic outcry condemning the displacement of over four million Iraqis due to the 2003 war, the United States Department of State has agreed to bring tens of thousands of Iraqis to the US over the next three to four years. Having played an integral role in this effort, Mr. Gabe Kadell, a graduate of the Denver University Graduate School of International Studies, an Arabist, and refugee relocation specialist joins *al Nakhlah* to illuminate the other face of war through his experience working with war refugees.



Michael Mylrea is a recent MALD graduate of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts, where he is Co-Editor-in-Chief of al Nakhlah. Mr. Mylrea is a research director for oil and gas at a private think-tank and conducts research at MIT Lincoln Lab.

Mr. Kadell works as a refugee relocation specialist for the African Community Center, a refugee resettlement agency in Denver, Colorado. Mr. Kadell’s primary responsibilities are to find employment for and relocate refugees, primarily from Somalia and Iraq. But moving to a new country and culture provide a challenging and rewarding day in the life of war that is often not seen on the news.

What different programs exist to relocate Iraqi refugees?

One is the Match Grant program, geared more for those with a stronger educational background and English-speaking ability, as they are expected to find employment and become self-sufficient within four months. Under Match Grant, the recipients receive a set amount of money for four months (about \$1200) and their case managers are expected to provide or ‘match’ in value the amount of cash assistance the Match Grant recipient receives through donations such as computers, furniture, volunteer hours, etc.

The other program is called the CARES program, which stands for Colorado Alliance for Refugee Empowerment and Success. Under the CARES program, refugees are strongly encouraged to find employment within four months of arrival, but they can still receive up to eight months of cash assistance if they are unable to secure a job during the first four months.

What happens if they cannot find a job?

As an incentive, recipients of the CARES program can continue to receive their CARES cash assistance in addition to paychecks from work during the first four months, but following the fourth month, if they have found a job, then they only receive the income from work and the cash assistance will end. If they do not find employment after eight months (in the CARES program) or four months (in the Match Grant program), then they must apply for TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), which is also referred to as welfare. However, TANF is only eligible for those with children, and others who are married or single and do not have children do not qualify.

For those that do not qualify for TANF, they often move in with friends or family, and receive assistance looking for jobs and filling out applications from a department with the Denver Office of Economic Development created solely to help unemployed refugees who have been in the United States longer than eight months.

What other services are offered?

Other primary services offered to refugees through the resettlement agency include case management, English instruction, and a two week cultural orientation session to educate new arrivals about basic laws and customs in the United States. In addition, refugees are provided a furnished apartment with some kitchen utensils and toiletries. Case managers are responsible for filling out applications for social security cards, accompanying new arrivals to the refugee clinic to get immunizations and medical check-ups, applying for food stamps and Medicaid, and referring adults to free English as a Second Language program at a local school. There is someone who is responsible for registering the children for school and the employment

specialists refer all adults to a two week training program called WorkStyles which focuses on finding and securing employment in the United States through instruction on how to fill out a resume, interview strategies and basic work etiquette.

Another program where employment specialists refer refugees is called the Work Intensive Skills Camp (WISC) where a group of four teachers have their students simulate basic job skills performed in a hotel or restaurant such as how to stack a housekeeping cart, how to operate a cash register, how to provide good customer service, how to file documents in alphabetical order, how to fold sheets, and how to accomplish assigned tasks as a team.

What kind of skills and background do most of the refugees come with?

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Most of the Iraqis I have interacted with have had some work experience and some of them have had post-secondary education. The profiles of the Iraqis I have interacted with are very diverse. One woman worked in the analysis and quality control department of a Baghdad brewery for over fifteen years, in addition to doing water analysis at a water treatment plant

for a couple of years. Another gentleman was the chairman of the Baghdad City Council and owned a restaurant in the Green Zone prior to his arrival in Denver, Colorado. There is a man who worked as an accountant for the Ministry of Housing and another who was a construction foreman for a large construction company in Baghdad. Recently, the U.S. government created a process to expedite issuing visas for Iraqis and also Afghans who have acted as interpreters for the U.S. Military. They fall into a different category under the name of Special Immigrant Visa (SIVs) as they only receive six months of financial assistance.

Many of the SIVs have a lot of professional work experience and often have security experience as well. The list goes on for the variety of occupations and professions people had before

they came to the United States. The Iraqis comprise a very diverse group of people with exceptional talents and abilities to eventually lead a very successful life in the United States.

What kind of matrix do you have to measure successful relocation of refugees? What are some of the challenges?

Reaching success or even a modest standard of living in the United States presents many difficulties that all refugees face upon arrival in the United States. The first and greatest challenge is the language barrier. Although many Iraqis speak some English, most do not have a high enough level of English to do the kind of work they did in Iraq as they do not have the adequate vocabulary or understanding of the nuances of American English.

Another major barrier is that certificates, degrees and licenses from foreign countries are not recognized in the United States, which means that the people with professional training abroad must undergo their training again in America.

Another major setback many Iraqi refugees face upon their arrival in the United States is the low-quality housing offered to them and the never-ending frustrations with Medicaid and food stamps.

Many of the apartments where they are resettled are in lower-income neighborhoods that are not very safe at night, the landlords are often very inattentive, and sometimes the rooms are infested with bedbugs and sometimes cockroaches. Of course, some are placed in nicer neighborhoods with better quality housing, but given the limited budget of the agency, most of the apartments are not very nice. Refugees and other residents on food stamps have also been forced to wait longer than usual for their food stamps due to an inefficient computer program that consistently makes errors processing personal information and due to a seriously understaffed department in the Denver Office of Human

Services. With Medicaid there are only certain hospitals and clinics in the area that accept Medicaid and they are often overcrowded and understaffed.

How do refugees respond to the employment demands placed upon them and how well do they adjust to life in America?

Upon describing the basic setting a newly arrived Iraqi refugee experiences in their first few months in the United States, one can understand the high levels of anxiety and frustration they feel as they try to start their lives from scratch. Given the stress and uncertainty that the Iraqi refugees face, it is still very difficult to work with them.

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Many of them refuse any kind of work involving washing dishes, moving carts at a grocery store, or doing housekeeping in a hotel. While these jobs are very unglamorous and the pay is low, they do provide vital work experience, a better understanding of the work environment in the United States, and an opportunity to

improve one's English through daily interaction with Americans.

I generally find that during the first few months after arrival many of the Iraqis turn down most of the entry-level job opportunities that I suggest, but as their eight months and end of cash assistance approaches they usually become more open-minded to most kinds of entry-level work. I should stress that I do not only search for jobs in hotels and restaurants, but I also contact schools, hospitals, daycares, post ads on Craig's list, attend job fairs, and post their résumés on a job board for all people living in the state. The first year in America is always a time for adjustment and presents the greatest challenges, but they usually establish strong friendships with other Iraqis in the area and within the local Middle Eastern community.

Do some refugees have feelings of resentment that a US-led war in Iraq forced them to leave their country? Do they plan on returning?

While trying to find employment for the Iraqis has been very challenging and oftentimes frustrating, I have really enjoyed speaking with them and learning about their lives in Iraq. One thing I have gathered through conversations is that some feel their lives were not bad prior to the 2003 United States invasion. As one Assyrian-Christian man remarked, "Life was good under Saddam as long as you were not involved in politics. We had electricity, sewage and running water, Muslims and Christians associated with each other without problems, and we had parties and other social events without fear of violence or sectarian killings." During dinner at his apartment a couple of months ago, he showed me a photo album of his wedding in Baghdad from two years ago. In every picture, there were family members and friends, both Muslim and Christian, and in each of them he pointed to at least one person that had been murdered because of the violence. The population of Christians in Iraq before 2003 numbered approximately one million while today there are less than 50,000. Many Iraqi refugees point out that their lives in America are much more difficult and confusing than in Iraq.

One woman remarked that, "finding a job did not require filling out applications with confusing questions accompanied by a long and tedious interview. We just needed to knock on doors and if we had adequate credentials then we would be hired." Most recently, I spoke to a Kurdish gentleman from As-Sulaymaniyah in the northern part of Iraq densely populated with Kurds, and he said that since his recent wedding a couple of months ago things have dramatically improved in Iraq, especially the hot zones that have consistently received media attention like Baqouba, Fallujah, and Ramadi. I asked him if he foresees himself moving

back and he replied: "I am happy with how Iraq is turning out, but America is the greatest country on earth where I can live a much easier life and not worry about my safety."

I imagine that the Iraqi refugees all have their own opinions regarding the U.S. invasion; some lived decent lives, and others belonging to opposition ethnic groups and outspoken critics of Saddam's regime lived in constant fear. If Iraq retains a semblance of safety and stability, I would imagine that some Iraqi refugees will return to reunite with their families, while others

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will become a part of the large established Iraqi communities such as in Dearborn, Michigan and San Diego, California. As new members of America, the Iraqi refugees will eventually find their way and lead prosperous lives as America still is the land of opportunity and people from all over the world find ways to thrive within our borders. It is just sad that America had

to attack and devastate a nation based on unsubstantiated evidence.

Are they optimistic about the future of Iraq?

Among the Iraqi refugees I have interacted with, some believe that Iraq has a promising future, but they still remain skeptical as there is a lot of foreign interference from non-state actors, like terrorists from places such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Pakistan, and state actors like Iran. I have not received a complete vote of confidence from any of them about an optimistic or pessimistic view of Iraq's future. Time will have to tell.

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What about those who have family in Iraq?

For those who still have family in Iraq, they react like any caring family member who has been separated from loved ones, and do everything in their power to try and reunite. An immigration lawyer provides pro-bono services bi-weekly at our organization and there are always Iraqis there in addition to other refugees from all over the

world who desperately wish to bring their family members to the United States.

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