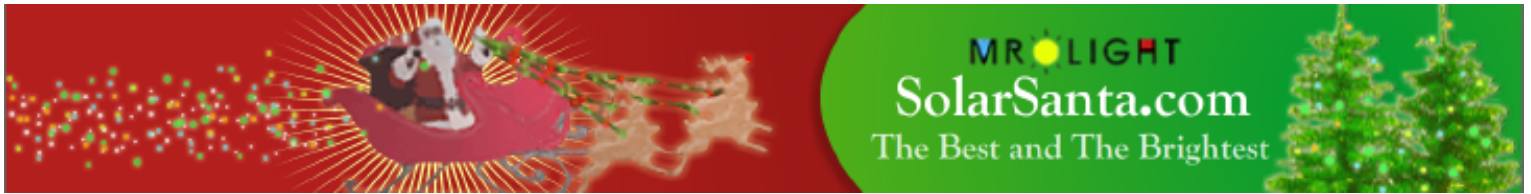




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 - Browse Issues
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 - Recreation
- Departments
 - Feature stories
 - Multimedia stories
 - Two weeks in the West
 - News
 - Uncommon Westerners
 - Book Reviews
 - Essays
 - For Subscribers
- Blogs & Opinion
 - The GOAT
 - Ray Ring's West
 - Heard Around the West
 - The Grange
 - Writers on the Range
- Jobs & Classifieds
 - Employment (15)
 - Property for Sale (8)
 - Home and Garden (3)
 - Tours and Travel (4)
 - Professional Services (5)
 - General Interest (3)
 - For Sale By Owner (0)
 - View All (38)
 - Advertising Information
- Conferences
 - Browse Conferences
 - Submit a Conference
- Internships
 - Browse Internships

- [Submit an Internship](#)



Seeking a vocation in no-man's land

Iraq to Berkeley

News - From the October 26, 2009 issue of High Country News by John Moir

See end of story for a complete package of refugee stories in this issue.

The threatening phone calls worried Salam Talib.

In 2005, the then-29-year-old Iraqi was working as a translator and journalist in Baghdad. Amid the chaos of Iraq, it wasn't even clear who had targeted him.

"I was a Shiite living in a mixed neighborhood where the Shiia and Sunnis were taking revenge on each other a lot," Talib says. "The people threatening to kill me were probably from a Sunni group, although it's possible it was Shiias who thought I was a traitor."

Two days after the threats began, a friend borrowed Talib's sedan. He had driven less than a block down a busy Baghdad street when three gunmen ambushed the car, killing him. Knowing that the assassins would almost certainly strike again, Talib booked the first available flight to Jordan, leaving behind his family, language, culture, career, friends, possessions and dreams.

Talib grew up in a small house in Babylon where he and his 10 siblings shared two rooms. As an infant, he contracted polio, which left him paralyzed in both legs. Wheelchairs and crutches became his primary means of moving around.

Despite the crowded living conditions, one room in the house was filled with books. Those books were Talib's salvation. While the other kids played in the neighborhood's dirt streets, Talib read. And he remembered everything.

"Even though education is very important in Iraqi culture, if you are disabled, you traditionally don't go to school," he says. But Talib's mother, realizing that he had a photographic memory, insisted that he receive an education. In 1996, Talib earned an engineering degree from the University of Baghdad.

Then, seven years later, the war swept his life away. Like thousands of Iraqis, Talib lost his job and sought work with the Americans. Because he spoke English, he was hired as a translator. He ended up working with Pacifica Radio and even filed some of his own news reports. Then came the attempt on his life.

"In Jordan, I had no rights whatsoever," Talib says. As he worked on immigrating to another country, his life fell into a new pattern: He found himself waiting. After four months, Talib obtained a visitor's visa to the U.S. Because he had a friend already living there, he came to San Francisco.

In the U.S., he faced a confusing and often illogical bureaucracy. "My lawyer told me that it was very hard to prove to the U.S. authorities that the Iraq situation was bad enough to qualify for refugee status," he says. "They

didn't understand how serious it was." When his six-month visitor's visa expired in 2006, he applied for a student visa, and enrolled in a computer science graduate program at San Francisco State University.

In 2008, Talib applied for refugee status. "I wasn't really here to study, I was here to escape the situation in Iraq," he says. Although 2 million Iraqis have fled their country since the war began, the U.S. has admitted very few refugees -- in 2006, for example, the U.S. accepted only 202 Iraqis. But Talib's waiting paid off: In 2008, the number rose to 13,823, and he finally qualified as a refugee able to legally remain permanently in the U.S.

Nowadays, Talib lives alone in a one-bedroom apartment in Berkeley. His tiny living room contains no tables so he can maneuver his wheelchair more easily. There are a few mementos to remind him of home: a ceramic Arabic drum, an Iraqi tapestry.

The Bay Area community is supportive of the disabled, Talib says, and people share his views on the war, the environment and human rights. He plans to stay, although at times he feels as if he lives in a no-man's-land between two cultures.

"I feel like I'm half Iraqi, half American," he said.

Talib knows of only 17 Iraqi refugees living in the Bay Area, all young men in their 20s. Most speak little English, and they often turn to Talib for advice.

"On the weekends, we want to go out," Talib said. "But we don't go to clubs because we don't drink. There are no Iraqi restaurants. We don't know what to do. Sometimes we get in the car, we drive around for a couple of hours, and we go back home."

Currently he is working with another journalist to raise funds for a documentary on the trafficking of Iraqi women refugees for the sex trade in Jordan and Syria.

He is still looking for a permanent job. Talib would love to use his computer skills to help Iraqis, especially those disabled by the war. "Millions of dollars are spent to protect people in Iraq while they are waiting in lines to fill out paperwork. One solution to Iraq's expensive security situation is to put forms online so people can do the paperwork safely at home."

Talib wants to be the main designer of this project, so he continues to look for a sponsor to support it. And, as he has done so often in this strange new life, he waits. And waits some more.

More refugee stories:

Editor's note: The newest Westerners
Immigrants from around the world are changing traditionally white Western communities such as Boise, Idaho.

Refugees unsettle the West

In Greeley, Colorado, a meatpacking plant observes Muslim traditions such as Ramadan while multicultural refugees adapt to the West's very different landscape and culture.

An orphan heads to college

Chan Kuoth's journey has taken him from Sudan to Tucson, Ariz., where he hopes to help other refugees.

A hard-fought immigration victory

Lioudmila Krotova's family, Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union, fought for years to stay in the U.S.

A new kind of ministry

Tom Simbo, who faced down gun-toting soldiers in Sierra Leone, now works with other immigrants in Denver, Colo.

Refugees by the numbers
Placing the influx of refugees in the West in context.

More than English
The Emily Griffith School has taught English to immigrants and refugees since its Language Learning Center opened in 1981. Using creativity, games and encouragement, the school also offers an orientation to U.S. culture and workplace protocol.

“I like America”
Multimedia: A unique neighborhood north of Seattle is home to about a dozen different ethnic groups, most of them refugees. The neighborhood center is used on Sunday mornings for Russian church, on Fridays for Arabic Muslim services, on weeknights for ESL classes for Somali Bantu.

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