

Life Interrupted

A PHOTO ESSAY BY LORI GRINKER

(Amman, Jordan, April 2007) Before they left, it got to the point where they stopped going outside. Finally the violence became intolerable and they fled. Now they feel as if everybody is afraid of them. For them, being Iraqi means being the enemy.

These are the urban refugees of Iraq, the families afraid to give their names lest they be seen as the enemy. Today, there are about 750,000 Iraqis who have fled to Jordan and an estimated 1.2 million who have spilled over the border into Syria. Over a million and a half internally displaced people have sought safety in Iraq's Kurdish region, but now life is

becoming dangerous there as well.

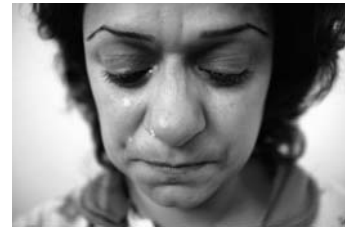
These are some of the people the US government sought to free from the rule of Saddam Hussein. Some helped the US with its mission, and many were happy to receive the US forces in 2003. Others who fled Iraq under Saddam Hussein went back, but found things worse than before and again became refugees.

This has become one of the largest refugee crises in recent history, but it's difficult to see. These are not refugees in tented camps waiting in line for aid from UN organizations—they are urban refugees.



“Muna,” 37, sits on the bed in the room she shares with her 4 children.

“My husband was a police officer in Baghdad for 15 years, and they killed him ... at the door of the house, in front of our small children. I was cooking when I heard the sound, and I went down and saw him lying on the ground. All of us were crying and screaming.”
(“Muna” and her family are Sunni Muslim.)



“Zahar,” a Sabean Mandaean Iraqi refugee.

“They held me down by the shoulders. I felt like my body was being torn apart. They spat on me and kicked me. I didn't think they were human. I didn't think I was human after that.

We left everything behind. When we came here we were hoping things would be better, but we found nothing. We are exhausted from living like this. I want to go back to Iraq. At least in Iraq you die only once.”

(“Zahar” is a Sabien Mandaean, a minority group in Iraq who have suffered extreme cases of persecution. The Mandaeans are ancient people who lived in Mesopotamia [modern Iraq] for thousands of years.)



Fatin, 30, with her husband, Samir, 44, and their children.

“My husband started to work with local British forces as a carpenter. After some time, all of the people from the area came to our house and told us he couldn’t work with the British, and he was only working with them because he was a non-believer.

One day when we were in my parents’ house in Baghdad, a group of militia men came and beat my father, my husband and my brothers. One of my sisters was stabbed in the back. They cut her legs and raped her in our family house, with the rest of the family in the other room. We couldn’t go to the police station to complain; we weren’t sure whether the police were different than the people who had come into our house.

Now we are in a poor neighborhood in Amman. Here we have no schools, no work, no money. I buy vegetables that are three days old because they are cheaper, and we manage.”
(Fatin is a Sabien Mandeian.)

“My son (4 years old, pictured here) thinks we are in another province in Iraq and we are going back to Baghdad within the next few days. If I was in Baghdad, I would put him in a kindergarten, but here I can’t because it requires money and I don’t know how they are going to treat him as a foreigner.

I am hoping the situation is going to improve in Iraq and I will be able to go back again. If I don’t have any choice—if Australia will not give us a visa, if I spend all my savings—I will go to Baghdad. I have two children. The safety of my family is more important than my safety.”

(“BHN”’s extended family is made up of Sunnis, Shias, Kurds and Turks. In June, “BHN” found out that his visa application to Australia was denied.)



Four year old Iraqi refugee. He is the son of “BHN,” 33, and his wife “JAJ.”



Fadi, who with his two brothers, worked for the American company Titan and US forces, is pictured here with his wife (she prefers not to give her name or show her face).

“My family and I helped the US troops during the first phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. We were working on the base and going on missions to Fallujah, giving candy to kids and interpreting. Day by day, things were getting more dangerous. The kids used to be happy and would wave when we arrived. Then, I remember the last day I was on a mission, the kids were throwing rocks at us. Suddenly we were traitors.

I had \$20,000 when I came to Amman. It’s all gone now. I thought I was a target so I didn’t stay in one place. But now I have to because there is no more money.”

(Fadi’s brother, Samir, came to New York for medical treatment and was then granted asylum. He lives in Queens with their sister. Fadi and his wife applied, but were turned down.)

Zena, an Iraqi refugee, who was the sole survivor of an internet cafe bombing in Baghdad, in physical therapy at the Médecins Sans Frontières hospital.



“I was in the internet cafe when there was a bombing in the building. It was normal to go there to chat with my uncle about how to stay with him (in Australia). At the moment I closed my password and was leaving the café, the bomb happened. Everyone was killed except me. I was in the hospital for about two months in Baghdad where I had six operations on my hands, face and legs.

I came to Amman with the help of another uncle. He came from London and helped me get to Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders). Now I will live in Irbil, in the Kurdish section of northern Iraq, with my sister. ... I will stay at home because I can’t move my hand.”

(Zena is Christian.)

—Ms. Grinker’s photography has been exhibited and published around the world. To view her work, visit www.lorigrinker.com