A World Apart

Iraqi Sisters Flee Violence in Home Country for Safety in United States

By Ann Morris
Editor in Chief

The black sign hanging in the middle of the market meant that people were dead.

Those who were still living would walk up and read it to see if any name was familiar. The sign also said where the ceremony would be so they could pay their respects to the deceased.

At one time, Fatimah Al-Bazzaz[12] knew the names.

"It's really horrible. It's horrible to see the name of someone you know on the sign, because they were something for you," Fatimah said. "They were something."

But not every name was on the sign.

There were her friend's families. Family friends. There were times where it could have been her parents. Or her sisters. Or her.

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Fatimah and her family moved to the United States nearly a year ago. She grew up in the capital of Iraq – Baghdad – during the 2003 Iraq War and the rise of ISIS.

"I lived with my grandparents on my dad's side – we lived together in the same house," Fatimah said. "I wasn't totally free because there was war at that time. I couldn't go out to play with my friends, so I was at home most of the time. It was too dangerous there."

Violence erupted across the city when Fatimah was just 4 or 5 years old. The family packed up their things and traveled west, staying away from their home until the dust settled.

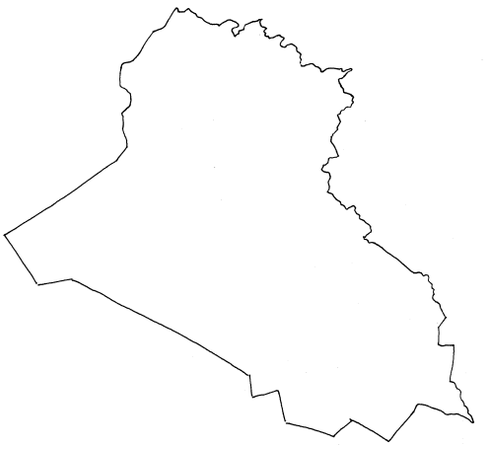
"When we went back, my grandparents from my mother's side ... their house was totally destroyed," Fatimah said. "Even though we went to the west, still I heard the explosions. I heard the bombings."

With their house turned to rubble and everyone devastated, Fatimah's maternal grandparents left the country. Fatimah and her family, however, stayed. From there, the state of Iraq and the people living there worsened.

"It was chaos," Fatimah said. "There was no laws, no orders, no leaders. Even people, the people, they went to the house of our leader, our president, and they start stealing stuff and going outside. He [the president] escaped and went into exile."

During this time, U.S. forces entered the region and tried to bring back a sense of structure to the community.

"They gave orders and gave us things – food," Maryam Al-Bazzaz[11], Fatimah's sister, said. "I used to go up to them and say, 'Hi.' The only word that I learned was 'Hi,' or 'Hello.'"



Fatimah and Maryam continued to go to school, despite the immediate danger around them. In fact, they were in more danger simply because of the school they went to.

"The school got threatened many times because it's Catholic school," Fatimah said. "It got threatened because it was private. And even my middle school – it was not private, it was normal, but still it got threatened. An explosion happened once. They put a bomb in the door, and the whole windows were broken. One of my friends got injured, and one of them collapsed."

Going out was also out of the question. At least, going out alone.

My neighbor was an old man," Fatimah said. "He was really nice. He had grandchildren. One day, all of his grandchildren were gathering at his home, like a big family gathering. He went outside to buy breakfast, something traditional. He went out to buy this, and an explosion happened. They called him. They couldn't reach him. Then they got a call [saying] that he was killed by that. Nobody would expect that to happen. The whole family was there, and they were waiting for him. I couldn't believe it. Like how? He was there seconds ago."

Fatimah's and Maryam's father and mother were also under constant threat because of their careers.

"All of the people who have exchange companies, they are killed because they have money," Maryam said. "They threatened my dad many times, it was so dangerous for him and for my mother. They put bombs in her work – she works as an engineer – they put bombs there in her place. We cried each day just to ask God just to bless them."

They remained calm throughout the whole ordeal – as long as they were together.

"Whenever an explosion happened, I go straight ahead and call my parents just to know," Fatimah said. "When we heard an explosion happen, we feel normal. It's something normal. We're used to it. But when my parents are not home, or they are away, we were scared. We just call them."

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Then things just got too bad.

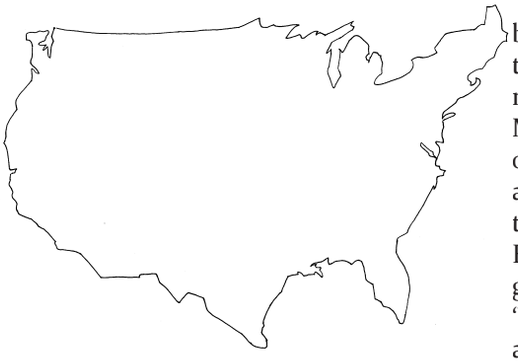
"Many of my friends' parents got killed," Fatimah said. "One of my friends went back home, and she saw her mother covered in her own blood. My dad's friend, he had his exchange company right next to my dad's. He saw men with guns, saw them got into the place and start shooting. They killed my dad's friend. It was next to him. And there are many explosions that happened in front of my father's place.

"That's why we decided we can't live there anymore, because ISIS was on our doors," she said. "They could have been there at any moment, and if they were, we couldn't go out. There's no way we can go out. We saw what happened in the areas that were taken by them. The women can't go out, they have to stay at home. They would enforce them as slaves, and sell them. Human trafficking. They take young kids and start training them. If they come, they will close the airport, they will close everything. So we

took a visitor visa, and we came here."

When they arrived in America, they were reunited with relatives, and took a month to settle. When the time arrived to enroll back into school, tensions were high.

"My first day, I was in shock," Fatimah said. "I don't know, like, should I be happy, or should I be sad? But I was happy. Because it's a big difference. ... And I felt like there was a language barrier. But still, I was happy. I felt safe. One of the most important things is when I study here, I feel that I'll take something and I'll achieve something. But there, I don't know if I will or not. No matter how good I am at the school, luck has a huge part of it. But here, how much you study is how much you achieve. So if you study hard enough here, you'll get good grades, and you'll get what you work hard for."



Two education systems halfway across the world from each other obviously have their differences. Dress code, required textbooks, curriculum, class size, building size, electricity, the list goes on. But it's the changes outside of school that seem to have made more a difference.

"In my country, [girls] have to wear long sleeves and long things because boys there are really bad," Fatimah said. "They will say bad things to you. No matter what we were wearing, even if we were wearing scarves or not. They will talk about you. But here, I feel that men and women are equal. That's what I feel. They are not treated differently, they can do the same thing that men do. So it's really cool here. You can feel free. You can be yourself, you won't be scared of anything. It's freedom."

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Some of the procedures here, usually followed to prepare for something that hasn't happened yet, proved to be too familiar to Fatimah and her sister. The lockdown drills in September, for example.

"They announced and closed the doors, and I remembered everything," Maryam said. "I was so scared, I even started crying. My friend said, 'Are you cry – Are you scared?' I said, 'No, I'm just remembering things from my country.' I was remembering. I remembered when they said to close the doors, that maybe there's someone in the school. All the girls started screaming. We were so scared, and they said, 'You will die at any moment.' We knew that we were going to die. And we heard bombs. They put bombs in the wall of our school, and it was just so scary."

Along with sudden reminders of the dangers their family escaped from, the girls have also faced prejudice they've never experienced before.

"We're tired, but we're trying to stay positive as much as possible," Maryam said. "In one of my classes, a boy told me that because my English is not real good. He said, 'You Arab people are messed up.' He [doesn't] know anything about me. He said I don't belong here, and he keeps bullying me all the time, but he has no idea what I went through."

For them, people who spout such comments aren't thinking before speaking.

"Just being Arab means that I suffered a lot," Maryam said. "That's what I say, because I'm from Iraq. Of course I've suffered a lot. And everyone from my country knows that."

For them, people tend to confuse fact with fiction.

"Explosions and people dying – it isn't the same as movies," Fatimah said. "When you are living this, totally different. One of the students in my English class said, 'So what if a car explodes in front of you? That's nothing.' You don't know anything. You need to live this to understand how it feels. This country has been safe, even in World Wars. You can imagine what happened on Sept. 11, in New York. For one day. Imagine if this happened for every single day since you were born until now. What that feels like. Knowing you could die at any moment."

Fatimah is more than just a refugee. She's a future doctor – at least, that's what she's working toward. She's also a lover of manga and all things Japanese. And she prioritizes family over much of everything else.

"I miss the strong relationships," Fatimah said. "In my country, we had really strong friendships, strong relationships with the family. We [Maryam and her] were happy when we were young. We lived in our own world. The other one [sister] is 11 years old. We fight all the time."

Although she misses her old home, Fatimah discovered a more creative side to herself while in America. Through school and through a new social life, she is free to describe her surroundings in her own words.

"I feel like I can't express myself very well because I've not been expressing myself for a long time," Fatimah said. "I'm learning."

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The one-year anniversary of emigrating from Iraq to the U.S., which is Feb. 11, has struck Fatimah harder than she expected.

"With the events that have happened here, I can't believe it is just one year," Fatimah said. "It feels like three or five years! When I was in my country, when I was watching American dramas and American shows and American movies, I didn't even think that I would have a life like this. Now, I'm feeling like I'm living."

Of all the things that have happened to her, one of the most memorable moments was her 18th birthday last March.

"This birthday was with my entire family, with my grandparents and my uncles and my cousins," Fatimah said. "When I was standing looking at the cake, I was just trying to realize the situation I'm in. When I was young, I said to myself, 'I'm going to be 18, and I'm going to be free!' and now there's a huge change. I have a lot of opportunities other people in my country don't have. I have a future here."

Fatimah has accepted what happened in her past, events that she had no control over but altered her life anyway. In fact, for her, "All that was nothing."

"My sister and I didn't care," Fatimah said. "We created a new world for ourselves. We ignored what was going on outside and what was going on with our parents. I'm at peace now with myself. You could be in the most perfect place, but if you're not at peace inside, you'll never be happy."