

From the Mideast to the Midwest

'We've Found Peace in This Land'

by *Nina Burleigh*

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Lincoln residents since 1994, Mohammed and Zainab Al-Baaj were among the first Iraqis to settle here. From left: Norhan, Suzanne, Zainab, Ali, Mohammed, and Taha Al-Baaj. [Photo by Khara Plicanic]

Like the pioneer families in Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House on the Prairie books, Iraqi refugees Naef and Suad and their seven children spent their initial winter on the Great Plains huddled indoors, suffering from shock and cabin fever. "The first time we saw snow, we were so excited, and the kids went outside and played," their father recalls. "But after that we felt like prisoners in our own home. There was so much ice, we only went to the store once a week."

But now his family, who arrived in Lincoln, Neb., 18 months ago, has adjusted to the climate and rhythms of American life. Weekdays, the four older children are on the school bus at 6:30 a.m. Naef and Suad spend their days studying English and doing volunteer work (a requirement for some government benefits). On weekends, the family goes to Pioneers Park and barbecues. The kids have even sampled the delights of Chuck E. Cheese on a few special occasions.

Although Naef is currently unemployed, he declares, "I want to stay and be a good citizen. I want to give back to this country." He ran a construction and restoration business in Baghdad before a kidnapping and death threats drove him and his family to flee. They came to Lincoln in April 2009. "I have found peace in this land," Naef says.

Naef and Suad (who do not want their last names printed for fear of endangering relatives still in Iraq) are among the newest of an estimated 5000 to 7000 Iraqis who've chosen the Lincoln area as their home in the last 15 years. They and their children are changing this Midwestern city, with its freckle-faced Future Farmers of America and its corn and beef industries. Of course, the changes have gone both ways. Sheila Schlisner is executive director of the Good Neighbor Community Center (GNCC), a nonprofit that assists recent immigrants to Lincoln as well as low-income residents. After her husband passed away a few years ago, she was deeply moved when the Iraqi women she works with brought her family "platters and platters of food," as is their tradition. She says, "There's so much negative press about Muslims. We need to encourage people to find out how wonderful they are."

Because of the city's size, relatively stable economy, and educational opportunities (it's home to the main campus of the University of Nebraska), the U.S. State Department designated Lincoln—current population 250,000—as "refugee friendly" in the 1970s. Thousands of Vietnamese refugees were resettled there, and waves of immigrants from other countries followed. Lincoln's public schools now include children speaking 52 languages.

"We've embraced diversity," Schlisner says. And at a time when tensions are running high in the nation over building an Islamic community center near the 9/11 Memorial in New York City, this welcoming attitude is appealing to Muslims. In fact, many Iraqis in Lincoln are secondary immigrants—ones who were first resettled in another U.S. city but moved to Nebraska because they heard about its friendliness, low crime rate, and strong network of social-services agencies.

Mayor Chris Beutler says, "I'm not surprised, but I am very proud of how our citizens have responded to the Iraqis. At the same time, we've invited these immigrants to share their culture with us, and that enriches the entire community."

Pastor Jim Keck of Lincoln's First Plymouth Congregational Church says parish-ioners have expressed "joy and curiosity" about the newcomers. Church members have sponsored refugees and hosted dinners where the Iraqis have spoken about their lives and being Muslim. Keck adds: "That's not to say there haven't been misunderstandings. People have stereotypes about Islam, and one is that it is a more violent religion. It warms my heart to see conversations occurring between different faiths so people can learn the truth firsthand."

Iraqis have been a presence here since the first Gulf War. Mohammed Al-Baaj, 45, and his wife, Zainab, 35—one of the first Iraqi families to arrive—moved to Lincoln in 1994. Today the couple and their four children are all U.S. citizens, and two years ago Mohammed realized his dream of owning a small farm.

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An American flag flutters at the driveway to the Al-Baaj farm. Chickens squawk in a pen behind the house, and three sheep graze nearby. Mohammed has been a forklift operator at the Kawasaki plant for eight years. Leaving for his midnight shift, he is dressed in a Nebraska baseball jacket just like other Cornhuskers. The only difference is that his wife, Zainab, wears a hijab, or a head scarf, and has packed his lunch pail with typical Iraqi foods like meat pastries, lentil soup, and salad with parsley and lemon.

Zainab has encountered overt anti-Muslim prejudice only once in Lincoln. On Sept. 12, 2001, a man on the street screamed: "Go back to your country!" Zainab, who as a teen fled Saddam Hussein's soldiers in the middle of the night, wearing a nightgown, doesn't frighten easily. "But I was terrified. I thought he'd hit me. I said, 'Look, I'm an American and I'm as traumatized by this as you are.' He left me alone."

Adnan Aljabiry, 44, who was a teacher in Basra before the first Gulf War, has also made a home in Lincoln. He fled to a refugee camp in Saudi Arabia after he and his wife took part in a rebellion against Hussein. When he came to the U.S. in 1996, he chose Lincoln because he heard it was a safe, friendly place. His wife joined him in 2000, and they have three children under the age of 8.

In 2007, Aljabiry helped a friend open a store in downtown Lincoln, the Ur Grocery, which is scented with anise, sumac, and cardamom and piled with tins of dates, halal meats, and Arabic breads. "If you want to get a license for a business or car here, it's easy," he says. "Over there, it's hard—there are many people who demand bribes." In addition to working at the store, Aljabiry is the imam, or spiritual leader, of one of Lincoln's two mosques. In that role, he tries to help Iraqis navigate the deep differences between Iraqi and American cultures.

"Teenagers here have boyfriends and girlfriends," he explains. "We don't have that in Iraq, and our kids here ask, 'Why not?'" As a mosque leader, he encourages families to discuss the divide and come up with a peaceful solution. "In another state, an Iraqi father killed his daughter when she got pregnant without being married. Islam does not tell him to kill her. In Islamic law it states that if you go to another country, you must respect and obey their laws." Still, the imam says that cultural obstacles are not the biggest challenges that the refugees face. "Language is number one; the weather is number two."

Despite such issues, Iraqi children tend to assimilate more easily. Three of the four Al-Baaj kids go to school in the outlying farm town of Raymond, and the student body of 300 welcomed Norhan, 16, in her hijab with little fuss. Two friends even joined her in the Ramadan fast this year. Her brother Taha, 15, is addicted to his Game Boy, and sister Suzanne, 9, loves ballet.

Although in public their mother, Zainab, wears the hijab and floor-length dress that distinguish an observant Muslim woman, her Midwestern accent, soccer-mom van, ever-ringing cellphone, and harried but cheerful personality mark her as another American working mom. A one-woman welcoming committee for Iraqis and for other Mideast immigrants, she runs a project at the GNCC called MENA (Middle East North Africa) Hope and advises arrivals on how to find food and clothes, learn English, and apply for jobs and mortgages. Among Muslims, many activities are segregated by gender, so she has arranged for women-only swimming lessons at the Y.

Since Iraqi women are accustomed to raising their children communally, they can feel isolated in the U.S., Zainab says. "Back home, families have aunts, sisters, and neighbors who watch the children too. If your kid misbehaves outside, he gets spanked in the street, and parents thank the neighbors for spanking them. Here no one has help."

Many of the new arrivals come scarred—men-tally and even physically—by the war and the Iraqi government. At an English class taught by two university students, Suad joined a dozen Iraqi women who shared harrowing stories of family members and neighbors being kidnapped, tortured, and beheaded in the violence after Hussein's overthrow in 2003. And while each woman had taken a different route to get to America, they all had the same reason for coming: "It's safe."

Although Adnan Aljabiry, the imam who works in the Ur Grocery, thinks often of the family he left behind, he has no intention of moving back. "When I go to Iraq to visit," he says, "I miss Lincoln every day."

Iraqis in America: The Facts

- More than 100,000 Iraqis live in the U.S., making up .3% of America's foreign-born population.
- Between 2006 and 2009, the U.S. admitted 34,470 Iraqis under the Refugee Admissions Program and 4634 who had worked for the U.S. government in Iraq.
- The two metropolitan areas with the largest Iraqi communities are Detroit (with more than 46,000) and San Diego (over 23,000).