

FIVE YEARS OF WAR

Iraqi woman who aided U.S. struggles to build a life here

By Janet I. Tu

Seattle Times staff reporter

It had become part of her routine in Baghdad: Glancing backward as she walked to work to make sure she wasn't being followed. Answering calls throughout the day from her anxious husband.

Yusra Al-Ani had heard stories about insurgents kidnapping, torturing and even killing people like her — Iraqi translators for the U.S. military.

Then one day, a fellow translator was kidnapped, and within a week pictures of her body — covered in bruises, eyes gouged out — appeared on the Internet.

That's when it hit Al-Ani: "This is real."

"Get out of this work," she remembers her husband saying. "Get out."

Some two years later, Al-Ani, her husband and their three children were able to get out of Iraq, seeking safety in the United States. Three weeks ago, they arrived in Auburn, ready to begin a new life.

But there are new hardships now: Fear for their safety has been replaced by worries over how they will make a living. And they miss their family and friends in Iraq.

On the fifth anniversary of the Iraq war, increased attention is being paid to the plight of Iraqi translators for the U.S. military.

In Iraq, an estimated 9,000 translators have worked for the U.S. and about 250 have been killed — mostly by Iraqi insurgents who consider them traitors, according to news accounts.

"They risked their own safety and the safety of their families" to assist the U.S. effort in Iraq, said Jason Faler, an Iraq war veteran in Tigard, Ore., who founded the nonprofit Checkpoint One Foundation to provide financial help to translators who come to the United States.

Under a 2006 program, only 50 Iraqi and Afghan translators a year were allowed into the country. That limit later was increased to 500 a year, but already this year, the State Department has stopped processing applications because the quota is about to be reached.

The translators already here entered not as refugees but as immigrants with special visas, meaning they have not been eligible for the food, medical and housing assistance that refugees receive.

Recent changes have made resettlement assistance available, but only to those admitted after Dec. 26, 2007.

And a new law will allow 5,000 Iraqi translators and other Iraqis who assisted the U.S. government to come in per year, but it hasn't been put into place yet.

In the meantime, a small but growing number of organizations such as Faler's are trying to help.

"When you stand shoulder to shoulder with someone who's unarmed and who then comes back to work each day, even though bullets are flying and they're under daily threat, the bond is closer than friendship," said Faler, whose organization has helped four families resettle.

"I feel we as a nation owe a tremendous debt to these guys."

Risky business

Al-Ani and her younger brother were born in Iraq to an Iraqi father and British mother.

They grew up speaking both Arabic and English and attended British-run schools in England and Lebanon, and public schools in Iraq.

Al-Ani opened a school to teach children English, while her brother found work with a company that hired translators for the U.S. government.

In 2004, her brother was among dozens killed by a car bomb in Baghdad, and when Al-Ani went to the translation company to pick up paperwork for his family, she was offered a job.

Her brother's killing didn't scare her away. A Sunni Muslim, she believed that if she, too, were killed, it would be God's will. Besides, "car bombs are everywhere," she said. "Even in the markets.

"The only thing I was afraid of was kidnapping. Because you don't know what they'll do with you and your body afterward."

Plus, her family needed an income. Her husband could no longer work at the restaurant he owned because it was in a dangerous area that had been overrun by insurgents. And the pay — about \$1,000 a month — far exceeded the typical Iraqi monthly salary of \$300, she said.

She took the job, interpreting for U.S. generals as they met with Iraqi military and police, and translating everything from military-supply inventories to equipment requests from Iraqi police.

She formed close friendships with her American colleagues, who admired her courage and dedication. "I felt as if they were my family," she said.

Other interpreters sometimes wouldn't show up for work if they got wind that there might be a bombing somewhere on their route to work that day. But Al-Ani "would come to work no matter what," said Kelly Bickford, a retired sergeant first class with the U.S. Army Reserve, who now lives in Greenwood, Maine.

Al-Ani didn't tell her neighbors where, or for whom, she worked, though her neighbors sometimes tried to get information out of her children, she said. Her husband told people she worked for the Iraqi Ministry of Defense.

In 2005, after the kidnapping and murder of her fellow translator — a mother with two children — Al-Ani's husband would become nervous if he couldn't reach her on her cellphone.

And they became increasingly concerned for the safety of their children: Mohammed, 12; Abdullah, 7; and Ali, 6.

They were especially worried about Abdullah, who has Down syndrome. Children with mental disabilities are sometimes targeted by insurgents who take advantage of their vulnerability, she said.

"They put explosive belts on them and send them out," Al-Ani said. "I had to make sure Abdullah stayed home."

When they heard the U.S. government was allowing a few interpreters to go to the U.S., they decided to apply. They sold everything they owned, left their extended family and went to Syria to interview at the U.S. Embassy.

Last October, they arrived in the U.S.

A difficult transition

Faler, of Checkpoint One in Oregon, is one of a number of returning veterans trying to help their former translators.

He served for a year in Iraq with the New York Army National Guard, and is a strategic planner for a health-care system in the Portland area.

With a couple of friends, he runs Checkpoint One on a purely volunteer basis, estimating that it costs about \$19,000 to bring a family of five to the U.S., factoring in paperwork, travel and three months of living expenses.

He's raised about \$30,000, but that money is stretched tight, given that the foundation is helping four families and half a dozen individuals.

"Quite frankly, we're hurting for cash right now," Faler said.

Another problem facing the translators here — and Iraqi refugees in general — is difficulty finding jobs. Some are wondering whether they should return to Iraq.

Al-Ani entertains that thought sometimes.

When she and her family arrived in the U.S., they settled near Fort Bragg in North Carolina. She thought it would be easy to find a job at or near the base once she had a green card.

It wasn't. She took temporary jobs on the base — taking part in role-playing scenarios to help train soldiers about life in Iraq. But full-time jobs she was qualified for were already filled.

And she didn't hear back from local restaurants or stores about any of the positions she applied for: cashier, dishwasher, waitress — almost anything.

Her husband, Qasim Al-Zubaidi, has had an even harder time because he doesn't speak English.

The family moved to the Seattle area after an Oregon woman read a newspaper story about Faler's recently arrived Iraqi translator and wanted to help him.

Faler's translator told her that his friend — Al-Ani — needed more help than he did.

So the woman put Al-Ani in touch with friends of hers in the Seattle area. The friends — many of them members of Wabash Presbyterian Church in Auburn — found Al-Ani and her family an apartment, gave them furniture and money and helped them apply for social services.

Now they're taking Al-Ani and her husband to nursing homes, schools and Emerald Downs racetrack to apply for jobs. Al-Ani said she is deeply thankful.

But her husband is lonely here. And she wonders whether the family would be better off if he and the children stayed here where it's safer and she went back to Iraq to work and send them money.

But then she remembers what life in Iraq had become. "You don't know who's good, who's bad, who's with you, who's against you.

"As long as we can get jobs here," she said, "that's all we need."



JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Translator Yousra Al-Ani with Col. Eric Wiedemann before leaving Baghdad. "I felt as if they were my family," she said of her American colleagues



JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

In Iraq, "the only thing I was afraid of was kidnapping," Yusra Al-Ani says of working as a translator. Now living in Auburn with her husband, Qasim Al-Zubaidi, and sons, she worries about money.

How to help

- Checkpoint One Foundation: www.cponefoundation.org, cpof@cponefoundation.org