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Lives in limbo

Many Iraqi academics have escaped death threats only to find that their qualifications are obsolete and immigration authorities are unsympathetic. **Jim Giles** hears their stories.

Some 20 years ago, Ali Althamir led a comfortable life in Iraq. As head of a university department and an expert in computing, he was part of a well-heeled middle class. He worked at one of the better institutions in the Middle East. And before sanctions crippled the regime of Saddam Hussein, he was one of many researchers who had money for their studies and could sometimes travel to foreign conferences.

It is a far cry from the life Althamir lives now. Since arriving in Britain to seek asylum in 2003, his fingerprints have been placed on file at the police station and he reports there once a month. Filling in the time between visits is difficult because he cannot now legally be paid to clean a lecture hall, let alone speak in one. When I thank him for taking time to meet me, he tells me not to worry. "I have nothing to do," he says.

It's a drab January day when I meet Althamir and other Iraqi scientists and clinicians at an office in the London South Bank University. They have travelled across the capital to meet

me, from cheap, rented accommodation paid for by social services and charitable hand-outs. With Althamir are an expert in radar technologies, a civil engineer and a former lecturer at Baghdad's most prestigious medical school. Between them, they share well over half a century of research experience, the painful decision to flee their country — and little idea of what the future holds.

The emotions they express are predictable: anger that a nation that invaded their country is now treating them so badly; frustration at the unfathomable British immigration laws; fear for family and colleagues they have left behind. They have fled death threats only to run into an unwelcoming immigration system and an indifferent academic community that often does not recognize their experience.

They did not know that Britain's growing immigrant populations have been a source of acute political tension for decades, tension that has led to tight restrictions on who can enter and complex rules to control the country's gateway. Nor did they know that experience

such as being a head of department would do little to help them find work. Learning about these obstacles beforehand is not always a priority, or even a possibility.

It is a physical and emotional journey that has been shared by many since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The United Nations estimates that half a million Iraqis left their country last year alone. Some of the academics who want to continue their research head to Britain, which has strong historical links with Iraq and is where many Iraqis studied at the start of their careers. They also go to the United States because of its strong reputation for research and funding. No hard figures are available, but several thousand academics are thought to have left Iraq since the invasion, of which at least a hundred have entered Britain and the United States.

Psychiatrist and researcher Ali Omar, who asked that his real name not be used, tells a story that many Iraqi academics will recognize. His life entered a radically new chapter on 9 April 2003, the day American troops

famously toppled the statue of Saddam Hussein in central Baghdad. The looting began almost immediately. “Everything went,” Omar recalls, “doors, air conditioning, lights.”

Omar found his clinic destroyed and spent much of the time afterwards building up a network of psychiatrists in Iraq to help those harmed by the war. He later organized a conference that attracted media attention — it should have been a triumph, but immediately afterwards relatives called. The publicity, they said, would make him a target of the militias and criminal gangs that were kidnapping and killing academics. They were right.

Targeted groups

Around 300 academics have been killed since the invasion, according to human-rights groups and media reports. No one is sure whether Shia, Sunni, Baath or anti-Baath groups are to blame, or exactly why academics are being targeted. Some researchers blame fundamentalist Islamic groups, who are accused of wanting to destroy Iraq’s middle class to establish religious rule. In addition, criminal gangs could be the cause, seeking to make money through kidnapping affluent professors and researchers.

In Omar’s case, trouble began when he was away at conferences in 2005. Neighbours reported that strangers had been inspecting his family home. In April 2006, he received an anonymous phone call and the warning to “leave or die”. Within an hour, he and his family had fled to nearby relatives — by July they were in Jordan.

Omar arrived in Britain later that month on a six-month visitor visa to attend a conference at London’s Royal College of Psychiatrists. Once in the country, he says that he arranged to speak to a barrister through a friend. The advice made him hopeful that he could qualify for asylum within a few months because of the death threats against him, and that, if successful, his family would be able to join him.

Immigration lawyers say that the advice from the barrister was flawed. It is now eight months since Omar’s claim went to the Home Office and no decision has been made. The delay should have been expected, say lawyers, given the backlog of 6,000 asylum applications that the Home Office says has built up, in part because of underfunding and the complex immigration rules. And because Omar arrived on a visitor visa, he is not allowed to work and is banned from receiving financial benefits. The money he brought with him, generated by selling his possessions in Iraq, has now run out. Yet if he were to leave Britain now he would forfeit

“Academic refugees have a key role to play in the rebuilding of their country.”

— Kate Robertson



The toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue marked the start of major upheaval for many Iraqi academics.

his application. “I’m desperate,” he says. “I don’t know what to do.”

Support structures

For academics like Omar, the only means of support is charity, and in his case the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA) has come to the rescue. The London-based organization, conceived in 1933 to help academics forced out by the Nazis, has provided accommodation and maintenance grants and flown his family to safety in Cairo.

Organizations such as CARA are keen to help academic refugees because “they represent the core of their country’s scientific and cultural capital and have a key role to play in the rebuilding of their country,” says Kate Robertson, CARA’s deputy executive secretary. “As educators and independent thinkers, academics are seen to be particularly influential,” she says. Preserving such capital also matters on a global scale. Of the thousands of academics helped by CARA in the 1930s, sixteen went on to become Nobel prize winners.

Like Omar, many Iraqi academics are unaware of the minefield of bureaucracy they will face to stay permanently or to work in Britain. Some could apply to the Highly Skilled Migrant scheme, which provides entry for well qualified individuals. But they then need to produce recent payslips and tax returns to show that they have been employed in their field, and these documents are often not issued

in Iraq. Another route of entry is to obtain a work permit through a sponsoring institution before entering Britain. The institution must prove that it has tried and failed to find a better qualified candidate from within Europe, which is difficult and often requires an inside champion for the applicant.

Political barriers

When it comes to gaining asylum in Britain, there could be an additional political impediment, says Chris Randall, an immigration lawyer with Bates Wells and Braithwaite in London, who has advised CARA. Ninety per cent of the Iraqi asylum decisions announced in the past year have been refusals, and Randall thinks that this is partly because British authorities are reluctant to admit that the situation in Iraq is bad enough to warrant asylum. “The government wants to portray the idea that Iraq is getting better,” he says. Those waiting to hear are therefore understandably nervous. The academics who asked that their names be changed were fearful of reprisals against relatives back home, but were also worried about antagonizing the UK immigration authorities. The Home Office denies any political bias against Iraqi asylum seekers, saying that every case is taken on its merits.

Even if Iraqi academics overcome the legal obstacles, they frequently struggle to find a job. Sabrine Gilel, once a dentistry researcher at Baghdad Medical College, left Iraq before the invasion. High-ranking party officials in Saddam Hussein’s Baath party would send their children to her college in the expectation

that they would be awarded a qualification, even if they hadn't earned one. Gilel refused to wave students through exams and this, together with a family link to a relative who had opposed Saddam Hussein, marked her out.

The breaking point for Gilel, who also asked for her name to be changed in this article, occurred in 1994. United Nations weapons inspectors were trying to discover the extent of the country's weapons facilities. During a break one day, Gilel and a colleague spotted men carrying barrels through the school. "We laughed. We said: these are the chemicals, here they are in our school." Gilel does not know who overheard, but by the next day her colleague had vanished. A couple of weeks later, after being warned by a friendly security official that she was also being targeted, she fled to Jordan.

Transferable skills

When she arrived in Britain in 1999, following a stint at a north African university, Gilel wanted to take up her research in dentistry again but found it impossible to get a research position or grants. Initially she did not have full residency status, which was enough to deter some institutions from employing her. And academic research was impossible because the General Medical Council, which oversees British doctors, did not recognize her qualifications and would not allow her to perform studies that involved patients. "All my experience has gone down the drain," she says. Even to practise as a dentist in Britain she had to study for two years and requalify, which she finally achieved last November.

Even with extensive experience back home, Iraqi academics find it difficult to break into British universities. Many have no connections in Britain, so they try writing fruitlessly to whoever is listed as a contact on a university website. They also have language barriers and are at a disadvantage because they do not understand how the British funding system works — problems that CARA is tackling by setting up a network of university contacts that can help to advise Iraqi academics.

Another harsh reality is that outside Iraq researchers may not have the skills, reputation or publications they need to compete in academia. After Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Iraqi universities were isolated from the rest of the world by sanctions. For many academics,



Many Iraqi academics have been targeted because of their position in society.

journal articles could be obtained only by sending someone to photocopy papers from libraries in Jordan. So unless they were able to spend time in foreign labs, even the most talented researchers would have fallen behind colleagues abroad. "During sanctions the level of knowledge moved on and left quite a lot behind," says Robertson.

Hatem Al-Delaimi is the author of three textbooks and has more than 20 years engineering experience — but now finds himself desperately trying to update his skills. After fleeing Iraq for Britain in 2002, he sent off countless application forms and never received a single reply, let alone a job offer. But he was able to get unpaid work on a robotics project at Kings College London, and CARA has provided £3,100 to cover around a year of research costs. It's a breakthrough, but perhaps only a temporary one. When

the money from CARA runs out, Al-Delaimi will once again need to convince universities to take him on. But by then he hopes to have at least two publications.

In the United States, another major destination for fleeing Iraqi researchers, immigrants find the situation slightly easier. They can still struggle to find an opening, says Rob Quinn,



Iraqi researchers fled their labs for foreign ones.

"The government wants to portray the idea that Iraq is getting better."

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director of the Scholars at Risk Network, a New York-based organization that defends the human rights of academics. But neither Quinn nor others working with Iraqis in the United States report the level of difficulty experienced in Britain.

One reason is that the US visa system is more flexible than that in Britain. Iraqis often go to the United States to work on temporary visas, for example, and can generally get those visas repeatedly renewed, provided the institution they work for backs their application. (No equivalent visa exists in Brit-

ain, says Randall.) The Scholar Rescue Fund, based at the Institute of International Education in New York, is currently funding around 20 Iraqi academics on such visas.

More funds

Once in the country, those academics must still convince institutions that they are up to scratch and worthy of employment. But this also seems to be easier, partly because a little more funding is available. American universities often have more flexible budgets than their UK counterparts and can find the money for a one-year contract, particularly if part of it is provided by organizations like the Scholar Rescue Fund.

The Home Office is talking about changing the country's immigration system and moving towards a system that may look more like that of the United States: one that places more emphasis on admitting those with appropriate skills rather than simply controlling numbers. Lawyers who represent immigrants say they will wait to see details before being convinced.

Such changes could take years to materialize — and offer little solace to Iraqis already in Britain, such as computer scientist Althamir. But in the weeks after meeting Althamir, I learn that he has been offered work with a team working on artificial intelligence at a British university. As an asylum seeker, he cannot be paid — but he can just about survive on state benefits and the £2,000 that CARA will provide in research funds. It is a step back into research, although it seems a far cry from what a former head of department might hope for.

But when I ask Althamir how he feels about going back to work, he corrects me: "I am so happy to join the research team; at least I can catch up with up-to-date research. But it is not going back to work," he adds. "I understand 'work' as a paid job."

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