

2 of 11 DOCUMENTS

Plain Dealer (Cleveland)

October 18, 2007 Thursday  
Final Edition; All Editions

## Iraqi family fleeing war arrives here fatherless

**BYLINE:** Robert L. Smith, Plain Dealer Reporter

**SECTION:** NATIONAL; Pg. A1

**LENGTH:** 1162 words

Walk into Khwater Nayef's new home in Lakewood and the first thing you notice are the two big photos above the fireplace, the only splashes of color in a nearly barren front room.

Gazing out from the pictures is Saad Khalil Yousef, a handsome and content-looking man. He's the all-pervading presence here, at once inspiring and haunting.

He's the husband and father left behind when Khwater (pronounced "cool water") Nayef and her three children ran for their lives from Baghdad, reached America, and recently became the first **Iraq** war **refugees** to resettle in Northeast Ohio.

He's the man she thinks of as she tries to catch her breath.

Just a few weeks ago, Nayef was a school principal, a beloved wife, a sure-handed mom. Today, she is probably a widow, she knows. She is foreign and poor and too often alone.

"They told me to leave," dark voices on the phone, she said in labored English. "I refused. I had friends in **Iraq**. A good job. Good house. My family."

Glancing toward the photos, she softly said, "I lost everything."

Nayef, 39, is a petite woman weighted with worry and guilt but not despair. She's aware that she and her children are luckier than most.

To date, the United States has accepted only a few thousand **refugees** from a war that has displaced more than 4 million people. The Bush administration this summer pledged to accelerate acceptance of **Iraq** war **refugees**, especially those imperiled for having worked for the U.S. government.

The three active resettlement agencies in Northeast Ohio expect to see more shattered families from **Iraq** in the months and years ahead. Khwater Nayef and her sons offer a glimpse into what some of those families will have endured, and what they must overcome.

Civil war and sectarian hatred set the stage for the family's odyssey. Saad Khalil Yousef, an accountant for **Iraq's** ministry of electricity, was labeled a traitor by some for helping plan the repair of the nation's power grid.

He belongs to the Sunni sect of Islam. His wife is Shiite. The mixed-status of the family offered no protection.

Iraqi family fleeing war arrives here fatherless Plain Dealer (Cleveland) October 18, 2007 Thursday

After Yousef witnessed execution-style murders at a job site, the death threats began. A car bomb blew up the house last fall, and the family moved into the Baghdad home of Yousef's brother.

On Sept. 17, 2006, he left to scout the family's escape to northern **Iraq**. Thirty minutes later, Nayef called his cell phone. No one answered. She is still calling.

Praying for a ransom demand, she began visiting the morgue twice a day to view the fresh corpses. Then, on Sept. 25, 2006, armed men came into her school, marched her outside and had nearly bundled her into a car trunk before a passing military patrol scared them off.

She fled soon after for Syria with her three boys - Muhammed, 14; Alhasan, 11; and Eisa, 9 - and reached a sister's home in Damascus.

A United Nations' **refugee** worker shared her story with representatives of the U.S. Embassy. Immigration examiners arrived from Cairo and interviewed her several times. To Nayef's astonishment, they one day offered U.S. visas and seats on a plane.

When asked if she had family in America, Nayef mentioned an uncle who maybe lived in Cleveland. She was wrong about the uncle, but she did not really believe she was going to America, anyway.

It was not until her plane lifted off from Damascus on Sept. 1, leaving behind a swelling Iraqi **refugee** community of more than 1 million people, that she knew she and her children had escaped. But to what?

A resettlement counselor for Catholic Charities met the family at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. He drove them to a sparsely furnished apartment in the top half of a double in Lakewood. The photos of dad went up on the mantel. A strange new world loomed outside the door.

On a warm afternoon in mid-September, about two weeks after the family arrived, Farid Sadsy knocked on that door. He had come with a pre-paid cell phone for emergency calls and with some frank advice.

A volunteer with a West Side mosque, Sadsy explained that he came to America from Algeria 18 years ago, as a **refugee**, with nothing. Now, he owns several businesses.

He spoke kindly but briskly, sharing news that drained the color from Nayef's face.

"Baghdad is gone," he said, waving a palm. "You have to start all over again."

He told her that her two college degrees likely would not get her a professional job here. Her English is too poor. A hotel may hire her to change beds, he said. She could wash dishes.

"That's how I started," he said, and he paused as he turned to leave. "I know it's hard. You are here. You are safe. Look at the people behind you."

Those looks back are nightmarish.

Her husband of 17 years thought they should leave. He pressed. Nayef resisted. She said she thought Baghdad life would improve, or at least not get any worse.

When her husband disappeared, a cleric with contacts with extremist groups told her he had been kidnapped, that he might only be interrogated.

"This happened in **Iraq** every day. Every day. People kidnapped and go free," she said.

But then kidnapers came for her at school, and she feared her children were next.

The headaches began in Syria and still come on suddenly, sometimes lasting two days, painful white flashes that once sent her to the emergency room. Sitting at a

Iraqi family fleeing war arrives here fatherless Plain Dealer (Cleveland) October 18, 2007 Thursday

desk at Max Hayes High School recently, during English class for immigrants, she started crying.

"I miss him. I love my husband," Nayef said, and she steadied herself with a breath.

The clock is ticking. **Refugees** to America receive six months of basic assistance - free housing, food and English classes - and then are on their own, expected to be working.

The children are also bewildered, she knows, missing their father, struggling with English - the new kids at school. They are adjusting faster than mom, as immigrant children often do.

They bring her small blessings, moments of joy.

After Muhammed's first week at Lakewood High School, a teacher told Nayef that her son - a polite and earnest teen - is tops in his class in math.

Eisa and Alhasan say they like school. They're asking for books in English.

Recently, alone at home at the end of an empty afternoon, Nayef heard a sound on the stairs outside. For a moment, she forgot the six-month timetable. Gone were thoughts of a coming headache, an empty refrigerator, a missing husband.

A smile as radiant as a sunbeam alighted upon her face.

The boys were home from school.

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: rsmith@plaind.com, 216-999-4024

BOX

HOW TO HELP

To help Cleveland Catholic Charities with its efforts to resettle **refugees**, contact its Office of Migration and **Refugee** Services by going to:

[clevelandcatholiccharities.org/ccpcm/migration.htm](http://clevelandcatholiccharities.org/ccpcm/migration.htm)

or calling 216-939-3754.

**LOAD-DATE:** October 20, 2007

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**GRAPHIC:** GUS CHAN THE PLAIN DEALER KHWATER NAYEF AND HER THREE BOYS - FROM LEFT, MUHAMMED, ALHASAN AND EISA - ARE TRYING TO REBUILD THEIR LIVES WITHOUT THEIR FATHER, WHOSE PHOTO RESTS: above the fireplace.

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newspaper

Copyright 2007 Plain Dealer Publishing Co.