



# Between Iraq and a Hard Place: Seeking Asylum and a better life, California's Iraqi Refugees Find Themselves in Limbo

## Inside the epicenter of Iraqi relocation in the Western United States

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Fleeing death threats in Iraq, Kamil Silewa crossed borders, worked dirty jobs, walked for days through Mexico and was greeted in the U.S. with eight months of detention.

Sandy Huffaker

(See related story: ["The Undercover Iraqi Asset,"](#) by Diana Ljungaeus and Frank Megna. View photos in the ["Iraqi Refugees in Limbo" slideshow.](#))

If you weren't paying close attention, it would be easy to mistake Main Street, El Cajon, for any other Main Street across the USA that has been transformed by its immigrant population. Kebabs and falafel are on the menus of most of the restaurants, and the local supermarket sells green olives, hummus mix and a wide assortment of olive oils. The television in one café shows a woman in a head scarf delivering the news in Arabic. Outside another, 2-foot-high hookahs sit on a table, ready to be smoked. These are sights we've become accustomed to in many California neighborhoods. But there are other details that make this street a little different. The word Babylon, for instance, is all over the place. There's Babylon Hair Style, Babylon Restaurant, Babylon Jewelry, Babylon Hookah Lounge. And inside a small deli, where a clerk's computer screen saver shows a photograph of men in traditional turbans and robes gathered on the floor around a feast of Middle Eastern delicacies, Iraqi flags are for sale near the lamb shanks and the ground meat preferred for a certain type of kebab favored in Iraq.

Where most of Los Angeles' Middle Eastern neighborhoods are dominated by Armenian and Lebanese shops and restaurants, El Cajon, just two hours south of L.A., is the epicenter of Iraqi relocation in the Western United States. With tens of thousands of Iraqis living in San Diego County, the area is home to the second-largest community in the U.S., after Detroit. The neighborhood Catholic church, St. Peter Chaldean Cathedral, with its distinctive domed roof and large cross, boasts some 37,000 Chaldean Iraqi members. A sign outside the church lists the times for mass in English and Aramaic. And one of



St. Peter Chaldean Cathedral has approximately 37,000 Chaldean Iraqi members.

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Iraq’s famous Khorsabad bull, replicated on the wall of St. Peter’s, keeps watch over the neighborhood.

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Main Street, USA, Babylon style

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its walls is dominated by a stone replica of Iraq’s famous winged Khorsabad bull sculpture.

Still, there’s definitely a California feeling in the air. Athar Luaebi, a cashier in one of the Main Street grocery stores, is a pretty young woman with strawberry-blond curls and blue eyeliner. She moved to the U.S. from Iraq five years ago and spends her shift ringing up Iraqi spices, sweets and other provisions for one Iraqi family after another. When a journalist asks about Iraqi refugees, she points out Sami Bhw, 37, who wears jeans, a T-shirt and flip-flops. On this day, Bhw has been in the United States for less than five months but appears to fit in perfectly. Bhw, with Luaebi translating, says he fled Iraq because extremists surrounded his house and tried to kidnap his 10-year-old son. Bhw’s neighbors managed to protect the child. Fearing another kidnapping attempt, the family left everything behind and fled to Turkey. After four years, struggling to make ends meet without a work permit, Bhw and his family came to the United States as refugees.

As Bhw tells his story, another Iraqi family walks into the grocery store. Luaebi starts to tell me that the younger son has burns on his arms — extremists set their house on fire — but pauses when she sees the look on my face. Luaebi nods her head with understanding and says, “You’ll get stressed if you stay here for two hours and hear all the stories.”

**A few blocks from the Iraqi** supermarket, on a quiet street in a concrete apartment complex, Kamil Silewa is trying to make a new life in America. To get here, he fled death threats in Iraq in 2005, crossed many borders, worked endless dirty jobs, walked for days through Mexico to Tijuana, and spent eight months in prisonlike conditions at detention centers in San Diego. Finally, Silewa found safety in El Cajon. But not much else.

Inside the apartment there is little furniture. Silewa, 45, shares the space with another Iraqi asylee, who sits in the living room watching the news in Arabic. A friend lent them the television, an old sofa and a coffee table. The two men have been living in El Cajon for months, but neither can find a job. Silewa walks me into the apartment’s single bedroom, which the men share. I start to take out my camera, but there isn’t much to photograph. The Iraqis cannot afford beds, so they sleep on the floor in the nearly empty room.

The three of us gather in the living room, and Silewa’s roommate, Salem Denho, tells me he left Iraq because of the violence. “Danger, bombings,” Silewa says, “everyday killings.” Denho explains that his parents, who are Christian, still live in Baghdad and receive threats because of their religion. “Now they can’t [step] outside,” he says. “They can’t buy anything.” A Muslim militia member killed a friend who lived near his parents. I ask Denho if he wants to bring his parents to the United States. “I wish,” he says, “but how?”

Silewa came to America in order to gain permanent residency and bring his wife and two sons, who ended up in Germany. But he hasn’t seen his family in three years. The family-reunification process can



“When we arrived,” Silewa says, “we went to the officer and told him: ‘We need you to save us. Please let us in. We are Chaldeans, we are refugees. We are asking for asylum.’”

stretch on for many years, and even if all their papers were in order, Silewa says, he has no idea how he would pay for their airfare from Germany. With no car and no job, Silewa sits in his apartment and thinks about his family.

“I still can’t sleep,” he says through a translator from the local Chaldean Middle Eastern Social Services office. “I am still thinking a lot about my family. What really makes it worse is that I’m not finding a job to support myself and to help my family [come here].” He and Denho, Silewa says, “both sit all night and just cry. I really want to cry just to release it.” Almost every night is the same, their American dreams just out of reach.

**About 4 million Iraqis**, forced to flee their homes after death threats and bombings, have been displaced by the ongoing violence. About half are displaced inside Iraq and often languish in camps without proper security or enough food and aid. The other half have fled to neighboring countries like Syria and Jordan, living in constant fear of deportation or imprisonment in places that do not recognize them as refugees and might at any moment kick them out. Taken as a whole, the current Iraqi diaspora is considered one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our times. Silewa is but one local face of a monumental and mostly ignored global crisis, which also embodies perilous national-security concerns.

Of the millions displaced, the United States will resettle about 17,000 new Iraqis this coming fiscal year. While that is a relatively small number of arrivals compared to the number displaced, about a third of them will end up in El Cajon and Greater San Diego. More than 5,000 new Iraqis will arrive in San Diego County during the fiscal year ending September 30, 2009, according to Catholic Charities in the San Diego Diocese. Getting jobs, homes and visas to reunite the families of the new arrivals — many of whom put their lives and their families’ lives at risk by helping the U.S. military — is a monumental task.

As the Iraq War played out, the Bush administration seemed to do everything in its power to ignore the refugee crisis. Former President Bush, reluctant to admit to a failed war policy, never mentioned the plight of the refugees and for years refused to allow Iraqis fleeing the war zone to resettle in the U.S. Only after significant political pressure from members of Congress and advocacy groups did the administration’s policy begin to change, and refugees began gaining access to the United States.

As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama pledged to address the humanitarian crisis caused by the war. He vowed to increase the amount of aid given to countries like Syria and Jordan, which harbor most of the displaced people, as well as expedite the process of resettling refugees here.

“The Bush administration made every effort they could to try to minimize the issue [of Iraqi refugees] in the debate on the war,” Amelia Templeton, a refugee-policy analyst with Human Rights First, says not long after the presidential election. The Obama administration, on the other hand, she says, has made the issue an explicit policy priority. “Obama has said this is a major problem, that we are responsible for this problem and we will try to change this.”

But as Obama’s administration came to power, the country was experiencing the worst economic crisis in decades. The financial crisis threatens the goal of providing more assistance to displaced Iraqis in the Middle East, and it throws the refugees who have already arrived in the United States into an even more precarious situation. The economic crisis, says Jacob Kurtzer with Refugees International, makes it extremely difficult for the Obama administration to ask for a large-scale infusion of funding for resettlement.

Human-rights advocates say the Obama administration must address two main challenges: It must provide safe haven for more Iraqis fleeing ongoing violence and persecution, and it must provide the

resources necessary to ensure that when the refugees arrive in the United States, they have enough assistance to find jobs and secure housing and basic needs.

“The previous administration was unwilling to deal with this issue — even with resources,” Kurtzer says. “Now we have an administration that is willing to deal with it, but the economic situation makes that difficult. There is a political will but, on some level, a lack of resources.” And with Obama’s recent reversals on torture issues, one wonders about the steadiness of the current administration’s political will.

“I do think we have a moral obligation to these people, whether we’re talking about it in good economic times or bad,” says Bob Carey, the vice president for resettlement and migration policy at the International Rescue Committee, a global relief and humanitarian-assistance organization. “I don’t mean to minimize the economic downturn,” he says, “but is this a time to turn our backs on people we’ve placed in danger?”

Addressing the issues of Iraqi translators and others who helped the U.S. Army and are now targeted by extremists is also critical to improving our relationship with the Arab world. “This is going to be a major issue,” says Kirk Johnson, who worked for USAID in Iraq and subsequently founded the List Project, which aims to resettle in the states those Iraqis who aided the U.S. war effort. “There is no more immediate opportunity that exists to send a signal to the Arab world and to the rest of the world and to those of us in our country, that after eight years of President Bush and after the difficulties that we faced in Iraq, our moral compass hasn’t been shattered.”

President Obama has the choice to either leave the displaced Iraqis to continue fending for themselves, or to implement a number of policies that would assist them. He has the power to dramatically increase the number of Iraqi refugees allowed into the United States; to influence the amount of humanitarian aid given to countries hosting refugees; to pay for social services; to encourage nations in Europe and elsewhere to resettle more Iraqis; to pressure host countries to temporarily recognize United Nations refugee status for the Iraqis; to pressure Iraq to take responsibility for its internally displaced citizens and develop a plan to address their needs; and to prioritize this crisis and thereby send a strong signal to all government departments working on the issue to speed up the bureaucratic process of resettling Iraqis. Or not.

**Extremists in Iraq targeted** Silewa and his family because they are Chaldean Catholic. Since the United States toppled Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003, porous borders and ineffective security forces have created an environment in which Muslim insurgents have had free rein to persecute Iraqi Christians.

In 2005, Silewa was living in Iraq and received a letter that warned him he would be killed if he did not convert to Islam. Silewa fled to Turkey and then Greece. When he couldn’t get permanent residency in Greece, he decided to go to the United States to seek asylum and pave the way to bring his wife and children. Silewa left Greece in June 2007 and paid a smuggler 6,000 euros (about \$9,500) to bring him to Spain and then Mexico. He walked with other Chaldeans from Tijuana to the U.S.-Mexico border.

“When we arrived,” Silewa says through a translator, “we went to the officer and told him: ‘We need you to save us; we need safety from you. Please let us in. We are Chaldeans, we are refugees, we are asking for asylum.’”

The smuggler had told Silewa that he would immediately be granted asylum and allowed to live in the United States freely. Instead, U.S. officials detained Silewa for eight months in overcrowded, prisonlike conditions until his asylum case was processed. He spent the first three months in a private detention facility near San Diego, operated by Corrections Corporation of America. The facility was so severely overcrowded that the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against CCA, arguing that the growing number of detainees in the limited space was creating inhumane conditions. The case was only

recently settled.

“In CCA, I was really depressed, and I was not sleeping all night. I was thinking about my family, plus thinking about the war,” Silewa says. “I know how the war is now, how people there are killing each other, and there are a lot of bombings. All this news, it really affected me because my family was still living there.”

After CCA, Silewa spent the next five months in the government-run El Centro Detention Facility, where he was allowed to go outside for only two hours a day. Desperate, he borrowed \$4,000 to hire an immigration attorney, and eventually won his asylum case.

The tenuous situation in host countries, mixed with the near impossibility of gaining resettlement in a third country, causes many Iraqis to illegally flee to nations like the United States. In 2007, 427 Iraqis applied for asylum in the U.S.; about two-thirds were granted it, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. Like Silewa and Denho, these asylum seekers pay smugglers thousands of dollars — usually all of their savings — to take them on long, sometimes deadly journeys around the world, until they are abandoned in Mexico and must walk through the desert to surrender themselves to U.S. border authorities and seek asylum.

“If we have a refugee program that’s underutilized, or we create so many barriers that we are not resettling the numbers that really need to be resettled,” says Kathi Anderson, executive director of Survivors of Torture, International, a nonprofit based in San Diego, which has treated Iraqis who have fled to the United States, “then desperate people figure out other means to come.”

**Iraq has seen a reduction** in violence, but many Iraqis still face death threats, kidnappings and an overall state of terror. Competing estimates put the civilian death toll at 100,000 to 1.3 million. Millions have already fled their homes and now live in limbo.

“Statistics say one thing, and reality says another. Statistics say violence is down, but that’s because many have already been driven from their homes,” says Malou Innocent, a foreign-policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute. “If we don’t address the situation now, the next generation of Iraqis will remember this. They will remember that they weren’t helped.”

The Iraqi government has economic and political incentives to encourage refugees to return home, Kurtzer says. Most of the Iraqis who have fled are well-educated and highly skilled, and their nation needs them to rebuild the country. If they return, it would also look good for the Iraqi government, because it would signal that the nation is more stable and secure. Nonetheless, humanitarian and advocacy organizations working with Iraqi refugees say they have not seen significant numbers of Iraqis return home and do not expect to anytime soon.

“The reality is that despite the security gains that have been made in some parts of the country,” Kurtzer offers, “the center of the country is still very, very unsafe, and the vast majority of the people who have fled have fled from that part of the country.”

Iraqis living in Syria or Jordan may be barely able to feed their families and cannot afford decent living conditions, but they can buy a cheap cell phone on any street corner and get the latest information on the security situation back home, International Rescue’s Carey says. And their friends and family consistently tell them that it is not safe to return. A spike in violence in April magnified the perception that it is not yet safe to return.

Extremists in Iraq target anyone who they think disagrees with them, but Christian Iraqis have been particularly persecuted. Social-services officials and immigration attorneys working with Iraqi refugees in the United States say fanatics in Iraq have burned down Christian homes and churches; raped women and girls; kidnapped, tortured and killed family members; bombed schools and nunneries;

poured acid on women who don't wear the hijab; threatened Christians with death if they don't convert; and killed the leader of the Chaldeans in Mosul, Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho.

"The religious minorities are fleeing an increased level of persecution from Islamic extremists or terrorist groups," says Ginger Jacobs, an immigration lawyer who represents Iraqis in San Diego.

Small minority groups like the Chaldeans and Mandaeans were largely tolerated under Saddam Hussein's regime, but they have faced violence since the United States started the war, according to Jacobs and other immigration attorneys and Middle East experts. Extremists have persecuted Christian Iraqis, in part on account of religion, and in part because of resources, Jacobs says. Some insurgents perceive Christians as either wealthy or having ties to relatives in the West, who could pay hefty ransoms. It is these Iraqis who are most vulnerable and unable to return home.

"What has been an even more recent trend, say, post-2006," Jacobs continues, "is a lot more murders, not just kidnappings for ransom. There have been kidnappings, ransom paid, and then the person is not released. So the situation does seem to be getting more severe."

The troubles of displaced Iraqis are further exacerbated because the current U.S. plan to resettle refugees leaves many of them vulnerable in America: no job or family to support them. Once they arrive here, they face difficulties finding employment, speaking the language and being able to afford the high cost of living and an expensive family-reunification process. And that is during normal economic times. Add to this a nationwide financial crisis, and many refugees are on the brink of homelessness. The resettlement program was chronically underfunded for decades, but the problems were masked by a strong economy, Human Rights First's Templeton says. Now that the economy has tanked, all the problems are on full display.

"The U.S. resettlement program has for some years been underfunded and hasn't changed significantly for the last 30 years," Carey says. "What we knew to be problems or deficiencies in the past were brought into sharp focus by the downturn."

The holes in the program used to be filled with the help of private donations, but the economic crisis has made it much harder for resettlement agencies to secure private funding, Templeton adds.

Father Michael Bazzi at St. Peter says the church collects money from its members every Sunday in order to donate goods to the community. In the past, they used the money to donate blankets and mattresses to needy families, most of whom recently came from Iraq. But over the past few weeks the church has not been able to donate anything because it does not have the needed resources.

The government provides refugees cash assistance and case management, including employment services for up to the first eight months after they arrive here, but the money is barely enough to survive on. In California, an unmarried refugee receives \$359 a month, a couple receives \$584, and a family of four receives \$862, according to Catholic Charities, which administers the money for refugees.

The program works only if refugees get a job within the first few months of their arrival. The majority of Iraqi refugees resettling in the United States were skilled professionals back home: doctors, nurses, teachers or engineers. Their initial frustration is often that they have to secure a job immediately and do not have the time to become licensed in their field. In the past, when the economy was strong, they would reluctantly take low-paying jobs.

"It's a pretty horrible shock if you are a well-educated, middle-class person," Templeton says, "suddenly in a situation where you are scrubbing toilets in a motel."

But now the competition for even those menial jobs is so fierce that the Iraqis face great difficulty

finding any job. Fewer positions are available, and the Iraqis must compete with laid-off Americans, who speak the language and have experience working in this country. In the past, 80 percent of refugees found employment within six to eight months of their arrival, says Nathaniel Hurd, a government-relations and advocacy officer for the International Rescue Committee. That figure rose to between 90 and 95 for refugees within the IRC network. Now, Hurd says, only 50 percent of refugees secure work.

“It’s really a tragic situation. I believe we made a commitment to help people establish their lives here, and we’re not doing that.”

Silewa received food stamps and \$359 a month from Catholic Charities for the first eight months he was here, but that did not cover his half of his \$800 monthly rent. He worked in an oil field in Iraq; now he must borrow money to pay his rent, utilities, phone bill, bus fare and other life expenses.

“These people have gone through extreme hardships and are suffering, physically, mentally, emotionally,” says Zina Salem, president and CEO of Chaldean Middle Eastern Social Services in El Cajon. “No homes, no jobs, no food; they’re becoming homeless. They have been forced out of their homes, they have been threatened, and it’s just not fair. I mean, we are America!”

“And some of these families,” adds Salem’s colleague Besma Coda, “they’ve been wealthy all their life. And educated! We have doctors, engineers, lawyers. It’s not fair to lose everything and just leave with their own clothes. It is a humanitarian issue. We need [the Obama administration] to pay attention to all these issues.”

**A Chaldean church group** called Legion of Mary visits Iraqi refugees who have recently come to El Cajon. We load up in their van, and they take me to meet some of the new arrivals.

“Everyone we visit, they have financial problems,” says Mona Bazzi, the vice president of the group, as we drive to an apartment complex where many of the Iraqi refugees live.

We go to the home of Saad and Baan Shaya. It is a workday, but the Shayas have no jobs and are home watching Arabic television. We sit down in their living room, on furniture donated to the couple by another church group, and the Shayas tell us that they left Baghdad in 2003 because of the war. They moved to Mosul in northern Iraq, and Saad owned a liquor store. In 2006, Muslim extremists threatened him, telling him to leave his store. When he didn’t, the extremists shot Saad in the leg and then bombed the store. He walks to the couch, pulls up the leg of his jeans and reveals a scar from the gunshot. The store bombing killed Saad’s 43-year-old brother. Saad escaped Iraq and fled to Turkey.

Baan says she left Iraq because a militia came to her home with a flier, giving the family three options: Convert to Islam, pay the militia monthly taxes or leave the country. She says some of her friends never had the chance to escape because they were kidnapped.

Bazzi pauses from translating to say that a militia murdered her own cousin two years ago. “They took the money and killed him,” she says. “They skinned his face. They couldn’t recognize him if it wasn’t for his ring.”

The Shayas registered as refugees in Turkey, and the United States resettled them in El Cajon in February. They have both been looking for jobs since they arrived. They receive about \$580 a month from the government, but that will only continue for eight months. They speak almost no English and don’t have transportation. Baan says she has been walking around, looking for a job every day. She says she would take anything — but she hasn’t had any offers.

“How will we live here if we don’t find a job?” Saad asks.

Wally Jamil, an Iraqi who is president of the church group, turns to me and says, “All of them ask, ‘After eight months, what are we going to do?’” He points out the window and says, “If he doesn’t find a job, they will be on the street.”

**Los Angeles also has an Iraqi** community, but it is smaller and has not seen a dramatic increase in the number of new arrivals. The community has been extremely worried about its relatives still living in Iraq or displaced throughout the region.

“Everybody has had somebody either killed or maimed or taken hostage,” says Salam Al-Marayati, executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council, a public-service and advocacy organization based in Los Angeles. “So everybody is concerned about the security of their family.”

About 400 Iraqi and Iranian families belong to the St. Paul Assyrian Chaldean Catholic Church in North Hollywood, according to the church’s priest, Father Noel Gorgis. He says most of the members of his church have family displaced by the war. The church members have been trying to bring their relatives to the United States, but most have been unsuccessful. “They try, but it’s very hard to bring them here,” Father Gorgis says. “Very, very hard.”

Chaldean Peter Abdulahad left Iraq in 1994 and now lives in Pomona. The Iraqi diaspora can be viewed through the prism of Abdulahad’s family alone — his relatives are now displaced around the world: San Diego, Sweden, Jordan, Syria, Baghdad, northern Iraq and Los Angeles. Abdulahad’s brother and his family fled to Jordan about two years ago and resettled in the United States as refugees last summer. “They left everything behind, their house, their furniture, their car,” Abdulahad says, “and now they live with me.”

Immigration attorneys working with Iraqis also report the difficulties refugees face in bringing their family members to the United States and out of harm’s way. A lawyer who handles Chaldean refugee cases in the Chicago area, Robert DeKelaita, says that he has had family-reunification cases in which a mother is in one country, a father in another and the children left in a third place.

Social-services workers in San Diego say that Iraqi refugees who resettle in the United States face the challenge of dealing with trauma, loneliness and depression from the war. Chaldean Middle Eastern Social Services provides mental-health services to Iraqi refugees who come to San Diego.

“The majority of them have posttraumatic stress disorder and have experienced extreme hardship, have seen brutal murders and killings or kidnappings,” Salem says. “There is a death in every family that walks in through the door.”

**About half of the displaced** Iraqis have fled to neighboring countries like Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt. There they wait, jobless and insecure, often hoping to be resettled in a third country like the United States. But with millions displaced and only thousands admitted into the United States, the numbers are not on their side.

Zahra Rifaat, 13, fled to Syria with her family in 2007 after the violence became unbearable. When a bomb exploded close to their home in southern Baghdad, they decided to leave. They moved to Damascus, where Zahra now attends middle school. Her three brothers cannot go to school because they must work to support the family.

“I am worried about my [children’s] future here,” her father, Cheng, says through a translator. “Three of my young can’t continue to study here. They are working seven days a week.”

Zahra told her story to Firas Majeed, a teacher in Syria. Majeed translated it for his organization, Native Without a Nation, which sets up Web conferences between Iraqi children in Syria and students around the world. Zahra says she misses her friends in Iraq and wants to return, but the memories of



violence still haunt her.

“Every time I remember that group of armed men who came into my school with big frightening guns, I get scared,” she says. Zahra describes how she loves reading and playing soccer, and she wishes to one day learn how to use a computer and speak English.

It is impossible to say exactly how many Iraqis have fled to Syria, but the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates 1.2 million Iraqi residents with current valid visas live there, according to the UNHCR Syria Update for November 2008. It does not know how many Iraqis live there without valid visas.

The Syrian government does not recognize United Nations refugee status. It therefore treats all Iraqis, even those registered as refugees, as “guests,” so they cannot work legally and could be kicked out at anytime.

“Without that legal protection that is recognized by the government, Iraqis live in a state of fear that they are going to be jailed and perhaps even forced to go back to Iraq. It hasn’t happened in large numbers, but people are still afraid,” International Rescue’s Hurd says. “Men, who are most at risk of being detained or expelled, often stay in the apartment where they live or immediate neighborhood. Many families don’t use services that are available to them, like public education or health care, because they think that coming out of the shadows will put them at greater risk.”

The poor living conditions and lack of work opportunities in host countries also pose a threat to regional stability because they create a fertile breeding ground for more violence and extremism. Children who cannot attend school and have nothing to do are more likely to spend time hanging out on the streets and getting involved in dangerous activities.

“What we have heard is that the children, they have nothing to do; they’re out on the streets; they’re remembering the violence that they witnessed in Iraq,” says Survivors of Torture’s Anderson. “As a result, some of them are increasingly becoming more violent themselves. Just having a lot of people in a small amount of space without alternatives is a problem.”

In addition to aggressive teenagers, unemployed adults with nothing to do can lead to violence and riots. Foreign-policy experts warn that the Obama administration should pay attention to this because further instability in the Middle East would of course hurt U.S. interests in the region.

“How can you possibly have a stable Iraq, how can it possibly be good for the Middle East, if you have massive numbers of displaced people inside of Iraq, massive numbers of Iraqis displaced outside of the country, lots of vulnerable people inside the country, who may not be displaced?” Hurd asks. “That’s not good for anybody.”

**It’s been 10 months** since I first met Silewa, and he has now been living in El Cajon for about a year. But he is no closer to having a steady job and cannot survive without help from others. He worked as role player for the U.S. Army for a few days in the beginning of 2009. That job, which paid him about \$200 a day, helped him to pay his share of the rent. But the job ended, and he has found nothing to replace it. He has filled out applications with companies in person and online, but he has not heard back from anyone.

“I want to work,” he says. “I need to work. I need the job. But nobody calls me. What can I do?”

His family remains separated, and it does not look like his wife and children, still in Germany, will join him here any time soon. His mother, brothers and sister live in Iraq. Another sister has escaped to Syria. Silewa said he does not want to return to Iraq because the country is still too dangerous. Yet life here is so hard, he sometimes wishes he had never come.

Silewa says that more Chaldean Iraqis like him have settled in El Cajon because they have a relative or friend living there. But he is worried about how they too will manage. "So much people come every day, every day," Silewa says. "No job, no work, nothing in El Cajon. What can we do? I don't know."

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