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## **IRAQ REFUGEES RETURN HOME: 'EUROPE DIDN'T WELCOME US'**

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□ Brothers Montather and Ali Al-Zobady gathered their belongings in this makeshift refugee camp on the Macedonian border and made their way to the Athens airport.

The Iraqi refugees weren't trying to circumvent barriers in southern Europe to reach Germany like so many others in the past two years — they were going home to Diyala in eastern Iraq.

Montather, 18, and Ali, 24, are among almost 300 Iraqi refugees who voluntarily left Greek refugee camps to return home this year. They are a tiny fraction of 23,500 Iraqis who migrated to Europe this year, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The reverse flight illustrates how many refugees have become disillusioned as European countries erected walls to prevent their passage north and then steered them to camps in remote villages like Idomeni or cordoned them off in tent cities like in Calais, France.

"The borders are closed, and a lot of people realize that Europe may not be the promised land that everyone imagined, said Christine Nikolaidou, spokeswoman for the International Organization for Migration, which bought plane tickets for refugee. A lot of people are trapped.

The Al-Zobady brothers left home in early February to escape violence in Diyala, where the Islamic State carried out attacks.

After spending \$5,000 on smugglers and other costs, they got stuck in Idomeni for three months, waiting for the shuttered Macedonian border to open so they could go to Germany. Both were disappointed, but they are now resigned to returning home.

We left my country because of the war, said Ali Al-Zobady, who worked as a teaching assistant in Iraq. We just want peace. We dream of a new life. The European governments did not save my life.

More than 50,000 refugees have been in limbo since March when the European Union and Turkey reached an agreement to send only recent refugees landing in Greece back to Turkey if they did not claim asylum in Greece or if their claim was denied.

Soon after the brothers departed from Athens on May 18 to go back to Iraq, Greek officials cleared the Idomeni camps with bulldozers, sending about 3,000 refugees to other camps and dispersing about 5,000 people across the Greek countryside.

The brothers could have moved to another camp in hopes of eventually making it over the Macedonia border. But Ali Al-Zobady wanted to finish his math degree at the University of Diyala.

Iraq is struggling with economic hardships, terrorism and, in major cities like Mosul and Fallujah, Islamic State rule. Last month, a bomb exploded in Diyala, the Al-Zobady brothers' home province, killing 16 people.

Many Iraqi refugees here said they prefer to rejoin their families and restart their lives rather than waste more time in Greece.

Some of them, of course, have their families back home, and they think that maybe it's going to be easier for all of them to continue their lives, Nikolaidou said.

Omar Haneef, 30, a Baghdad native who spoke by phone from the Athens airport, said his prospects were bleak back home, but he couldn't stay in a camp or be homeless in northern Greece.

I am afraid to go back to Iraq, but there is no other solution — the situation is really bad. Macedonia is not treating refugees well. The borders are closed, he said. I have decided to return back to Iraq, in spite of the dangerous situation there. In Baghdad, I cannot secure my life. But I have no other option. Europe didn't welcome us.

Another Iraqi, Mohammad Aljawad, 45, from Karbala, spent five months in Turkey and Greece

before deciding to return to Iraq. The violence there won't stop him.

I am not afraid of going back to Iraq, he said. The security situation in Iraq is not recent or new to us. We are used to it.

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