
RETURN TO IRAQ: FORMER TRANSLATOR CHASES SAFETY IN US

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Athens, Greece - Murad stared at the ceiling of his room. He had been living in a shipping container in the Skaramangas refugee camp near Athens for five months. He wanted to smoke a cigarette, but he wouldn't smoke that day. "I made a vow to never smoke again until my family is reunited," he says.

His father and mother, who are living in a Yazidi refugee camp in northern Iraq, would be shocked to see him now. He used to spend a lot of time outdoors and his skin was tanned. But, since his arrival in Greece, he has become pale and thin, his cheek bones cast small shadows over his sunken face. He has lost at least 10kg in six months. Despite being only 32, what is left of his hair has turned silvery grey. He hides it under a baseball cap.

"I fear that I will never get old enough to have grandchildren, and tell them about this miserable time in my life," he says. "But if I do have children someday, I will honestly tell them: Europe was hell for me."

One day in August his phone rang, giving him hope that his misery would soon be over. On the other end of the line was a representative from the International Organization of Migration (IOM). Calling from their Middle-East office in Jordan, they told him of the latest development in his case.

Overjoyed, he ran outside to tell his two brothers and sister who had travelled with him to Greece: "We're going to America!"

Translator for the Americans

In August 2006, Murad took a job as a translator for the American soldiers who were training the local police on the Iraqi border with Syria. He was proud of his work and the American troops

appreciated his efforts.

Together with his passport and documents, Murad carries in his bag, the nine letters of appreciation he received for his work. "This bag hasn't left my body once. It's a part of me," he says, stroking it.

Major Tyrone Powers, who wrote one of the appreciation letters, still vividly remembers Murad from his 2006 mission in Iraq. "It was dangerous, our team encountered some attacks, gunfire and IEDs [improvised explosive devices]. Murad was exposed to the same dangers. Without translators like him, we would've been lost out there," the major told Al Jazeera in a phone interview, speaking from the US.

But Murad faced more than just the dangers of the battlefield. "One day, a man I don't know called me and said: 'You are an American dog, we will slaughter you like a dog'," he recalls.

Despite this, Murad continued working for the Americans until the war ended in 2011, but he feared for his and his family's safety. When the war ended, the Americans pulled out and his contract was terminated.

After that, he was unable to find a steady job.

Escape from Sinjar to Europe

Murad and his family are Yazidi, from the mountains of Sinjar. When in 2014, fighters with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant group (ISIL, also known as ISIS) came to the region, killing and abducting members of the community, his family fled and ended up in a refugee camp.

"I've been back to our home once, after they [ISIL] were gone," Murad says. "I won't allow my siblings to do the same. It would break them."

Everything was stolen from their house, he says, and some walls are missing. His street is in ruins, his neighbours' house is gone. Bombed. "The whole village is a ghost town," he says.

This was when Murad decided to apply for asylum in the US. Because he had served as a

translator for the US army during the Iraq war and because of the death threats, he and his family were eligible for the US refugee resettlement programme.

They applied to be resettled through the Resettlement Support Centre for the Middle East and North Africa (RSC MENA), which helps those eligible to resettle in the US.

But Murad felt restless even after applying for the programme; he feared for his safety and was worried that the application would take too long to be processed and that it was too dangerous to wait in Iraq. This is why he decided to travel to Europe to seek out another avenue for safety, leaving his parents and four of his six siblings behind at the camp.

"I didn't go to Europe because I was hungry, I wanted to be safe," he says.

On February 4, he crossed the border of Iraq into Turkey together with two of his brothers, one sister and 22 other Yazidis. Twenty days and two failed attempts later, he reached Europe after a dangerous journey in a rubber boat across the Mediterranean.

They had paid 2,000 euros (\$2,240) each to smugglers. "My family had to sell the car and spend its entire life savings," he explains.

When they jumped ashore on the Greek island of Lesbos in February, Murad thought he would soon be able to start working in Germany. He wanted to quickly earn enough money to pay for his parents and the rest of his siblings to join him.

But Murad didn't reach Germany. The Macedonian-Greek border in the north had been closed and his journey had come to a dead-end.

There are currently more than 60,000 refugees in Greek camps like Skaramangas. "Many of them don't have any prospects," says Roland Schoenbauer, the spokesman for UNHCR in Greece. "The frustration builds up, because they are stuck in Greece."

Murad describes how he became depressed and disheartened. "I didn't like it any more when the sun was shining," he says. "I preferred grey and cloudy days, so I didn't have to feel happy."

Unsure of the status of his US resettlement application, Murad also applied for asylum with the UNHCR programme in Greece, knowing that as a Yazidi refugee his chances of being accepted were high.

Going to America

But Murad's decision to travel to Europe complicated his US refugee application process. In order for the case to go forward Murad would have to return to Iraq. The IOM in Jordan told him that they can only help people who are physically in the Middle East. Conducting the interview in the office of IOM Greece is not possible, he was told.

Murad doesn't understand why the bureaucratic process works this way, but he is grateful for the opportunity.

IOM Greece would pay for Murad's tickets plus an additional 500 euros (\$560) each, for him, his two brothers and sister to relocate back to Iraq.

"I know I'm in danger in Iraq, but it's my only chance to reach safety with my whole family," Murad says. He says he doesn't want to wait any longer and is willing to return, if that is what it takes to one day become an American.

On October 4, the IOM called to tell him that his whole family had been granted case numbers and invited to pre-screening interviews, the next step in the process of being admitted to the US.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, near the Turkish border, Murad will find his parents and siblings in a white UNHCR tent. "I will smoke my cigarette with them there. It won't be in Germany like I expected, but I will have kept my vow."

So Murad will board a plane on October 5. Ready to chase his American dream. "I have already chosen where I want to live," he says with excitement. "Nebraska." He has relatives there, he says.