
IRAQ REFUGEES IN SEATTLE HAVE MESSAGE FOR DONALD TRUMP: 'PLEASE THINK AGAIN'

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Ten days ago, Adil Kheder Nimr and his wife, Shatha Sulaiman Kheder, arrived in a place they call paradise. As the plane came into land in Seattle over the glistening waters of the Puget Sound, after a long journey from Iraq, he only had one thought: Now we'll be safe. My son will have a future. The US is my country now.

On his lap he held that son, a happy child with a tangle of black hair who had been born in a refugee camp 10 months previously. They named him Steven. Years earlier, Nimr had decided that if he ever had a son he would call him that. I like American names and I always wanted to live in the US.

On their necks, Nimr and his wife wore necklaces with little metal crosses. They are not Christians, they are Yazidis, an ethnically Kurdish people who follow a monotheistic religion all its own. But they carried the symbol of the Christian faith as a sign of respect for their adoptive country.

They showed reverence, too, for the new leader of their new home, who just a day after their plane hit the Seattle asphalt would become president of the United States. Donald Trump is my president, Nimr said, raising his hand to his head in salute. I respect him. He is a strong man of North America.

Nimr wasn't to know just how apposite that choice of words was. They arrived in Seattle on 19 January. Trump's inauguration took place the following day and exactly a week after that, the strong man of North America signed an executive order that would ban all incoming refugees from Iraq from entering the US for at least 120 days.

Among those left stranded on the wrong side of the ban were 13 other members of Nimr's family, including his parents, sisters and brother. Though they have all been granted security clearance, and had dates scheduled to fly to Seattle, they are now in limbo.

Trump has rationalized his immigration ban on the grounds of fighting Isis. Which sounds strange to Nimr, because he and his family were themselves victims of the terrorist group.

In the eyes of the jihadist fighters of Islamic State, Yazidis are the lowest of the low. They don't see us as human, they say we are infidel, he said, running his fingers across his neck like a sword.

Isis think it's a prize if they catch a Yazidi. They will show us no mercy, they will do anything to us.

In addition to their ethnicity and religion, there was another problem. Nimr's father worked as a

translator for the US army in Iraq. As Isis grew in strength in the region, many interpreters, denounced as collaborators, were targeted for car bombings and assassinations.

The family at home in their new apartment. I feel so safe and confident here, Nimr said.
Photograph: Karen Ducey for the Guardian

Nimr's father began to receive regular death threats and on one occasion narrowly escaped kidnapping. Notes would be passed to him saying: You are a spy for the United States, you work for the infidels.

In August 2014, the issue came to a head. Their town of Shekhan came under Isis attack and the 27-year-old couple were forced to flee north leaving their jobs – hers as a hairdresser, his in an internet shop – their home and their extended family.

It was about three in the morning, Nimr said. We awoke to the sound of bullets. No one knew what was happening. We just ran. A lot of families left loved ones behind – babies, elders – they had to save their own lives.

One of Nimr's uncles, who was physically unable to get away, has not been heard of since.

Nimr and his family found safe haven in a refugee camp in Kurdistan. From there they were offered a lifeline by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), one of America's largest refugee resettlement groups, which has helped 20,000 people make new lives for themselves in Seattle over the past 40 years.

While Trump has presented an image of refugees as being potential conduits of terrorism into the US, the profile of the typical person helped by IRC tells a very different story. Of the 771 who were resettled by the organization in Seattle last year, 70% were women and children, and 200 have gone on to become US citizens.

IRC had anticipated before Trump's ban came down that nationally about a quarter of the people it would be relocating to the US from Iraq and Afghanistan this year would be former translators for US forces who, like Nimr's father, had faced death threats from the terrorists.

Nimr talked to the Guardian through an interpreter in a mixture of Kurdish and Arabic, sitting in an apartment provided to the family by IRC in the suburbs of Seattle. The space is virtually bare, as they are in the process of moving again.

Trump's immigration ban means there is little chance that Nimr will be joined by the rest of his family any time soon. So they are being relocated by IRC to a smaller apartment.

Despite the transience of the accommodation, the family remains overjoyed to be here. I'm so happy I'm in the United States, Nimr said. I can go outside now, walk in the street, go shopping. I feel so safe and confident here. Back in Iraq I was too scared to go outside – you never knew what was going to happen.

But he is agitated. When asked simple questions, such as what he thinks about American television, he is unable to answer, turning his responses always back to the refugee camp in northern Iraq where his parents continue to struggle.

There's not enough food there, no heating or electricity, or clean water to drink. They don't care for the people in the camp. I'm so worried about my family there.

Trump's executive order has left Nimr deeply confused. On the one hand he is overwhelmingly

grateful towards his new country and its new president, and why not? They share a visceral hatred of Isis, which destroyed his life.

I am so happy Donald Trump is my president, he said, saluting again. He can protect the United States from terrorism.

But whats happening now doesnt make any sense to him. Iraqi people are victims of terrorism, too. We didnt fight the US. There are good people over there like my father who worked hard for the US army. They must be separated from the bad people or else they will die.

Asked what he would do were he to have a face-to-face audience with Trump in the White House, Nimr said: I would kneel before him, and kiss his hand, he said. He is my president. But then I would ask him, very politely: please sir, would you think again?

Since youre here...

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