

Shaymaa, an Iraqi Mother: 2013 Update

by Marie Braun and Mary Beaudoin

In February 2011, an article appeared in this newsletter about Shaymaa Abulkadham Hasan Hasan ("Hasan" appears twice in her name), a young Iraqi mother whose nine-year-old son, Mustafa, had received extensive injuries from an errant industrial electric cable, part of the jerry-rigged electrical system erected in Iraqi cities after the country's infrastructure was destroyed. His left arm was severely burned and hung limp at his side. He lost his left leg just below the knee and two toes on his right foot. Through private donations, Shaymaa was able to bring her son to Minneapolis for medical care, which was also donated. The following year an update of Shaymaa's story appeared in the March/April 2012 issue of this newsletter; in it Shaymaa described how life continued to be so difficult in Iraq that she, her husband, and six children wanted to leave and eventually be resettled somewhere where there was hope for the future. (Both articles are archived and available online at www.worldwidewamm.org)



Shaymaa Abulkadham Hasan Hasan and her son, Mustafa, now 11 years old.
Photo: Jeff Grosscup

Here is how Shaymaa's story has unfolded since then. Shaymaa's husband, who worked as a taxi driver in Iraq, sold his car so that the family of eight could go to Turkey where they planned to apply for asylum or refugee status. Their 14-year-old daughter broke off her engagement with a young man in Baghdad as she did not want to be separated from her family, but instead wanted to go with them to Turkey.

In September 2012, the family took a bus from Baghdad to Ankara. They found a small apartment in the city of Eskisehir, five hours from the capital. Shaymaa describes the city as a beautiful place near the mountains. But it has been very cold there and all eight members of the family sleep in one room because it is the only room with heat. The family receives a small stipend from the Turkish government. They barely survive. Their oldest son, Hussein, frequently goes to a mosque, asking

for food. He and Mustafa also go to the market at the end of the day and ask for the food that will be thrown out when the little fresh food shops close.

Shaymaa's hopes for her children's education were only partly fulfilled. Refugees can attend public school in Turkey through the age of 16, and her six-year-old twins attend school and her five-year-old daughter will go next year. But her 15-year-old son is not in school. Her 14-year-old daughter does not attend school either. That is because it is too distant to get to except by bus, there is no money for the bus, and a school closer to home doesn't allow the head scarf which her religion requires.

When the family tried to send Mustafa to school in Turkey, he was bullied. His family then kept him out of school because they were concerned that his arm, miraculously almost fully functional after doctors in Minnesota operated on it, would be injured again. But he is able to walk on the streets better in Turkey because they are well maintained and even, unlike the roads in Iraq. And the city is very safe.

However, the situation in Turkey had changed since the family had first thought about moving there. Tens of thousands of asylum seekers and refugees had been flooding into Turkey from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia. Turkey is host to approximately 300,000 Syrians, who fled the violence in their country (UNHCR Briefing Notes, 12 April 2013); the UN agency is expecting to host 500,000 Syrians by the end of this year. Processing for resettlement of the enormous number of refugees is slow. There are no guarantees and it may take a couple of years.

The family has begun the process. Their preference is to resettle in Minnesota. In the meantime, as an applicant for refugee status, Shaymaa's husband cannot work.

In March of 2013, Mustafa, now 11, and accompanied by Shaymaa, came back to Minneapolis so that he could receive a new prosthesis, as he had outgrown his.

At the age of 31, Shaymaa is visibly thinner than she was a year ago when she last brought Mustafa to the United States for treatment. She had become ill in Turkey and required two blood transfusions. She may have developed anemia, or it may have been something else.

Mustafa's physical condition was evaluated by medical specialists in Minnesota, who again donated their expertise. His arm is doing very well. He was fitted with the new prosthesis and is receiving physical therapy. While in Minneapolis, he attends Dowling Elementary School, as he has on his two previous visits. He is happy there.

Shaymaa and Mustafa expect to return to Turkey this month and, like the millions of refugees whose lives have been disrupted in some way by war, they will wait for their numbers to be called until a country will accept them and they can settle in a permanent home somewhere away from the ongoing chaos in Iraq.

Marie Braun visited Iraq during the Sanctions Period and is the founder of Twin Cities Peace Campaign and the chair of the End War Committee of Women Against Military Madness. Mary Beaudoin is the editor of this newsletter and a member of these organizations.