

Iraqi students at UMass speak out about turmoil in their homeland

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AMHERST — They look like typical college students, dressed in jeans, sneakers, sandals, a sleek sports jacket for one of the men, a stylish white bag for the woman. They've been enjoying themselves the past few weeks — a trip to Six Flags amusement park in Agawam, live music shows in Amherst and Northampton, touring New York City.

But the three Iraqis, who have been staying at the University of Massachusetts with 21 others from their country, are carrying a heavy burden: fear for their families back home in a country torn by death and destruction at the hands of Sunni Muslim militants, who have taken over large chunks of Iraq.

Just this week, dozens of people were killed in and around Baghdad in suicide bombings. A sacred tomb was blown up in Mosul and threats of female genital mutilation in militant-controlled territory have surfaced.

"I am afraid," said Minatullah Amer, 21, an Arab from Baghdad, who goes to American University of Iraq in the Kurdish city of Sulaimani. "Every day, you are always worrying, always on edge. You don't know what will happen when you go out." Ordinary people, she said, have taken to carrying guns for protection.

"There is no law enforcement. Everyone is panicking."

Her parents — her mother is a professor and her father is not working due to illness — have sent her only sibling, a 24-year-old brother, to Turkey for his protection. “My parents have been very afraid for his safety.”

Dhafer Noori, 21, a dental student who lives and studies in Baghdad, said he has checked with his parents every day since leaving his home June 27. He is worried that the terrorist organization ISIS, or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, will push into Baghdad.

“We are living in fear of that happening,” he said.

US respite

The violence in their country has escalated to its highest point since U.S. troops left in 2011. Last month ISIS, which is seeking to topple the Shiite-dominated government and create a hard-line Islamic caliphate, captured Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, and other territory in northern Iraq.

Meanwhile, the 24 Iraqi students at UMass are among 118 Iraqi students who have come to the United States this summer as part of the Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program, funded by the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and run by the Meridian International Center, an international leadership organization in Washington. In addition to UMass, four other universities, Virginia Commonwealth, Mississippi State, the University of Texas at Austin and Ball State, are participating. Each has a focus — for UMass, it’s public policy and public health — and offers the students intensive courses, community service work and social and cultural experiences.

The UMass contingent, which had been staying in a UMass dormitory, left Amherst on Friday to spend some time in Washington before heading home July 31.

Amer, Noori and Karzan Fadhil Suhbat, 23, agreed to talk with the Gazette at UMass on Thursday, taking a break from preparations for a fundraiser they were holding that night for the Amherst Senior Center at Bistro 63 at the Monkey Bar & Grill on North Pleasant Street. They were to make presentations about their country and their work here and turn audience donations over to the senior center. During their stay, they also had helped deliver food to elderly people in town through the Meals on Wheels program.

They were not looking forward to leaving.

“I’m disappointed to go back,” Noori said. “All I hear from home is that they have no electricity. It is not very secure. They are having trouble getting clean water and stuff like that.”

In contrast, he has savored his time in Amherst. “I loved every second of it. It was wonderful,” Noori said. “We’ve done a lot of activities, a lot of challenging things. We had lectures that made us feel more independent and confident than before we came here.”

Amer agreed. “The people here are so kind and generous, but what will stick with me most are the lectures. The professors here have many brilliant ideas. They got me and my colleagues to open up our minds to accept many things that maybe we don’t accept in our culture.”

One of those, she said, is gay rights. "It is one of those things that I cannot forget."

All of them particularly enjoyed the camaraderie they felt with their fellow Iraqis, who are from a variety of factions — Sunni, Shiite, Kurd, Christian — that have become increasingly, and more bitterly, divided at home since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

A fractured homeland

Suhbat, who is from Kurdistan, an independent, safe region in Iraq that has its own government and military, lamented the lack of unity in his country.

"Here we are all Iraqi people," he said of the students' time in the United States. "We are all united. There is the brotherhood among us. What we see among the politicians at home is not what we see here."

The three students, two Arabs — Noori is Sunni Muslim, Amer prefers not to specify — say that lack of unity is ruining their country.

The central government consists of a Shiite prime minister, the most powerful position, a Kurdish president and a Sunni speaker in an agreement made in 2003. Most Iraqis are Shiites.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is viewed by some as a leader who has worsened the divisions in the country and has spurred the insurgency that resents his favoritism toward Shiite interests. The three students interviewed are among those who think that.

"Iraq requires new leadership," said Suhbat, whose parents are television and radio broadcasters in Kurdistan. He blames Maliki's emphasis on sect, or tribal loyalty, for empowering the militants.

"He has given priority to the Shia people and the Shia party more than any other party," Suhbat said. "Now the Sunnis want their rights. Some of their demands are not possible," but their anger had spread to moderate Sunnis who resent Maliki and support the militants, if not their tactics, he said.

"People in Iraq think more about their sects than their nationality," Suhbat said. "In the past it was not like this. It was fighting against one dictatorship." Now, he said, the Iraqi people are fighting each other. "Politicians use religion as a tool to get power."

In his opinion, a lack of national loyalty also has led to the weakness of the Iraqi army, which rapidly lost territory in the northern part of the country to ISIS last month, with many of the troops turning and fleeing.

"The military does not feel they belong to a united country. They think they belong to Shia, or Sunni or other sects," he said.

The students criticized Maliki's recruitment of quick replacements for regular troops by offering cash and sending untrained soldiers into battle.

Many of them, Amer said, are young unemployed people, desperate for the money. “Most have no experience in even holding a weapon,” she said. “These people are going into war knowing they can’t defend themselves. It is happening right now as ISIS continues to take over cities. It is a very wrong decision.”

A crumbling country

In spite of what they see as a weak army, the students believe much of the country’s money is being spent on the military, primarily equipment — “tanks and weapons they can show off on television,” Amer said. They don’t see it being channeled into education, community development or public services.

Baghdad, they say, once one of the most beautiful cities in the world, has crumbling infrastructure, power blackouts, a lack of public parks and other amenities. Basra, an oil-rich area, is plagued by poverty, they say. “That is not the way it’s supposed to be,” Suhbat said.

Iraq’s minister of education appeared on television promising that 400 new schools would be built, added Amer, and that “millions and millions” would be spend on higher education. “Yet when you look at the country, you don’t see new schools,” she said. “Nothing is being built. Nothing is being developed.”

Still, life under Maliki is better than it was under the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, the students agree.

“As a Sunni — and Saddam was Sunni — you would think that I would prefer Saddam Hussein, but I far prefer to be under the Maliki regime,” Noori said. “Under Saddam we were very suppressed. We had no civil rights, no TV, no phones, no Internet. We were like a small village outside the whole world.”

There is increasing pressure, including from the United States, for new leadership in Iraq. This week Kurdish moderate Fouad Massoum was chosen by the Kurdish delegation in the parliament to assume the presidency, a mostly ceremonial post. While the students like him, they believe things will not improve until Maliki, who has served for eight years, is replaced.

“There will be no radical reform with Maliki,” said Suhbat.

“People feel helpless,” said Amer, who expressed doubt about the legitimacy of his election.

Mixed emotions

As they face their return home, the students have mixed feelings.

Suhbat said he has been impressed with the people he has met in the United States. “It is very different from what we witness in Iraq,” he said. “People here care about one another. They are open-minded.” He said seeing that has been a “life-changing experience” for him.

He is optimistic that when conditions in his country, a similar spirit will emerge from the Iraqi people.

“We are the same, but it is the circumstances that have made us act differently, sometimes fight against each other,” he said.

Suhbat plans to return home to finish his degree in information technology over the next two years and continue his work with the Arab Youth Climate Movement, a group launched in Cairo two years ago. He is one of 12 leaders from across the Middle East and North Africa directing young people in work on common problems such as climate change. When he graduates, he hopes to work on upgrading Iraq’s information systems, particularly in hospitals, where those systems are crucial.

Amer and Noori are uncertain whether they will build their futures in Iraq.

Noori, who has lived in England in the past, plans to finish his bachelor’s degree at al-Rafidain University College in Baghdad and then study for his master’s degree in England, where his older brother is now studying. His father is a dentist and his mother, who holds a Ph.D., works in the ministry of health in Baghdad. He also has a 12-year-old sister.

If conditions improve in Iraq, he can see himself living there.

“I want to help my country,” he said. But if the opportunity arises for him to practice dentistry in England or the United States, “I would rather go there.”

Amer does not plan to stay in Iraq. “But you never know what might happen,” she said. Her major is international affairs and she intends to pursue her master’s degree in the United States. She hopes to use her education to help her country from afar one day.

“I see people in Iraq who do want change and they are really motivated,” she said, “but the government doesn’t give them support. It fights them. So, if I’m in a similar situation, I might jeopardize my family and put myself in danger.”

If that changes, so may her plans, but right now it looks bleak in Baghdad.

“Everybody is afraid of everybody, even your neighbors,” she said. “You don’t know what they might do to you. Living with that pressure every day, every day, it can get to be too much.”

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