



BRYCS Parenting Conversations: Toma, an Iraqi Father

In March 2008, BRYCS staff spoke with Toma, a Chaldean Iraqi father who came to the U.S. with his family and was granted asylum. He has two sons and one daughter.

Family Background

My family came to the U.S. in 2005. We had been in Jordan for three months, and then came to the U.S. on a work visa. After about six months, I applied for asylum for myself and my family.

In Iraq, we lived in Baghdad, where I was born in 1968. My wife and I married in 1994, when I was 26 and my wife was 23. After I graduated from college as a civil engineer, I served in the Iraqi military for two years, because this was required of all men under Saddam. Iraq had a lot of wars, from 1980 onward—with Iran, with Kuwait, etc. During the war with Iran, men had to serve eight years or more, but when I was in the military, only a year-and-a-half was required.

Leaving Iraq

The story of my family is like the story of all families in Iraq.

I worked with a construction company that also helped the U.S. Army and the Coalition Forces. The terrorists threatened me because I worked with the American Army. We left Iraq after the terrorists tried to kidnap my son. The terrorists extorted money from me two times and threatened to kidnap my son, so we fled to Jordan.

It is very expensive to leave Iraq by plane—it would have cost our family about \$2,000 to leave by plane, which is a lot of money for an Iraqi. So, we left by car, which cost about \$200. We stayed in Jordan for three months, but the children were not able to go to school there because we were only temporary residents.

I also have two sisters who fled to Syria, and one brother who left for France. My oldest sister worked in Iraq's historical office. She was threatened by the terrorists, and then they bombed her house, so now she is in Syria. My other sister was married to a man who was a general under Saddam. He was working in the defense ministry, helping to coordinate between the Iraqi and American armies, and the terrorists killed him about a year ago. Before he died, they even kidnapped my sister's 19-year-old daughter; she has not been heard from since. My sister's family was in the car, and the terrorists stopped the car, put a gun to my brother-in-law's head and removed my niece from the car; no one knows what happened to her. This is normal in Iraq—you can hear 1,000 examples like this in Iraq.

After these things happened to my sister's daughter and husband, she fled to Syria as well. My sisters are together there, but they have lost everything. My younger sister has an appointment for a refugee interview with the UNHCR office in Syria. I hope she can come to the U.S. after that. We try to help my sisters in Syria—we send them money, and I call them almost everyday.

Iraqi Chaldeans

In the past, there were many Chaldeans in Iraq—maybe one million. But now, I think there are only 200,000 – 300,000 left in Iraq, mainly in Northern Iraq. In Baghdad, and in the South, most have left and gone to other countries. I still have aunts and uncles in Baghdad, but there are not as many Chaldeans there as in the past. There used to be about 400,000 – 500,000 Chaldeans in Baghdad; now there are maybe 100,000 – 150,000 Chaldeans there.

Iraq is now very bad for everyone, but especially for the Christian people. Here in the U.S., there is no difference in the treatment of Christians and Muslims, but in Iraq we suffered from the terrorists. In Iraq, people ask about your religion—whether you are Christian, Sunni, or Shia—but in America you don't hear about this.

There is a Chaldean church here that we attend. It is only about two miles away. The church here is very similar to our church in Iraq—only the setting is different. You can see the same church events here that we had in Iraq—engagements, weddings, food, etc.

The main difference between Chaldeans and Muslims in Iraq is the interaction between men and women. For Chaldeans, the young men and women can talk together, there is more freedom. In church, the young women and young men are all together. But in the Muslim community, you don't see that—the men do not see the women, they cannot talk with each other. Alcohol is not forbidden for Chaldeans [as it is for Muslims], but our principles are not to use it a lot. I have a drink maybe once a month. But we are against the use of drugs.

The Asylum Process

We came to the U.S. because my wife's family is here. They helped me to get an H-1B visa. After we were here about six months, I applied for asylum. Someone helped me fill out the forms, but it was not a lawyer.

I went to the asylum office and was interviewed for about two-and-a-half hours. Then the government sent me a letter, which I answered, and they sent me some more questions, which I answered. Then they accepted me and granted me asylum. So I came with an H-1B visa but changed to an I-94.

When you are in the U.S., it is easy to ask for asylum, but from Iraq, it is very difficult. Many Iraqi people would have a strong case for asylum—such as my sisters—but the refugee process has been very slow. There are about two million Iraqis in Syria alone, and they are all looking for refugee status in other countries. The USA has taken about 7,000 Iraqi refugees from all the countries in the Middle East—this is a small percentage. With Europe, it is the same thing.

Employment

In Iraq I was employed as a civil engineer. When we first arrived here, I worked for a construction company for about a year. But the economy is not so good here, so after a year I

was laid off from my job. After I was granted asylum, I initially worked in a supermarket. Then I got a job installing satellite dishes. I know about satellite dishes from Iraq, so the situation is now OK. I am able to work for myself as a subcontractor.

My wife does not work; she stays in the home. We live with my wife's parents and her two sisters in a four-bedroom house. Three of my wife's family members work, but we handle our family's finances separately. My wife has four sisters and one brother; two of her sisters are married and live with their families in California.

When we are in a good situation, we will get our own house. Living with nine people in one house is very difficult, but in Iraq we usually live with this number of people in the house.

Schooling in Iraq and the U.S.

The schools in Iraq lacked everything—no electricity, no water, no clean bathrooms or kitchen. There were about 40 students in a 300 square foot room. There was only the blackboard and the chalk, so you know how the education would be there.

We sent our children to public school in Iraq, but sometimes we had to keep them home due to the bad situation—kidnapping, bombs, everything. One time in 2004 when the students were leaving school, I was standing near a garbage can next to the school, and I noticed a bomb in the garbage can—the terrorists could have killed 400 students in that school!

Now in Iraq, if you have a daughter who is 12 or 13, you cannot send her to school because she may be a target for the terrorists, like my niece who was kidnapped.

In Iraq, children start studying English when they are in fifth grade, so my sons only knew English from using the computer. When we first arrived, the boys were in classes to learn English. After 3-4 months, they were moved into the regular class. Now you can speak English fluently with them, and they are excellent in their schoolwork. Here, everything is available for them, so they are very happy. Sometimes I tell them we are going to return to Iraq, and they say, "No, never. We want to stay here!"

My son noticed that there are only 20 students in his class here, but in Iraq there were 40 students. There are many resources in the school here, but in Iraq there was only the blackboard and the chalk. Here they don't hear bombs during the day. Also, in Iraq all the students receive Muslim education in the public schools—this is a big problem for Christians in Iraq.

The children miss their friends, and our church in Iraq—in the past we would go to church for many events—but now they are happy here.

There are other Iraqi students in our children's school here, so they have not experienced teasing. When they get into high school, I don't know if that will change.

Discipline and Reward, Chores and Responsibilities

In our family, we use discussion to discipline. I explain the situation for them, and I try to take what they say into account, and then we advise them. There is no punishment. I have never

used my hand or legs in punishment. Our only punishment is in talk—no TV, go to your room, if you make a mistake you must fix it.

In Iraq, the punishment is usually done in the school. You can see the stick in the hand of the teacher, and they use it a lot. Here it is different.

The children's main responsibility is their studies. They also help us in the home, with things like shoveling snow. My oldest son also helps me sometimes with my job. He might come with me after school and hand me tools while I am working.

Employment and Education

I began studying English when I was in the fifth grade in Iraq, and most of my college studies were in English. I know many terms, but I'm not very good in conversation. I speak Arabic and Chaldean, but Arabic is my first language because I was born in Baghdad.

My wife was born in a village in Northern Iraq, so Chaldean is her first language—it is similar to Aramaic [the language Jesus spoke.] Our children are also learning Arabic and Chaldean. My daughter's Arabic is weak—she has forgotten a lot of words. At home we speak both Arabic and Chaldean—with the older family members we speak Chaldean, with me the children speak Arabic, and amongst themselves the children use English.

Parenting Differences

Not all Iraqi people are the same, just as not all American people are the same. My son's best friend is an American boy, but he is like my son, and his family is like my family in principles. Sometimes you find different families, but you find a lot of families that are like our family. We see some differences, but we also see people that are like us.

In Iraq, you can see good families and bad families—you can see whatever you want. Now I have American friends, and my son's best friend is American, and for my daughter—all her friends are American.

Being a parent in the U.S. seems the same for us, as in Iraq. We have the same principles and responsibilities as in Iraq, but the difference is the manner. In Iraq, you cannot let your wife wear any dress she wants, because people will make problems for you. But here there is more freedom—it is the same principles, but the manner is different.

Neighborhood

Our neighborhood has been very good for our children. We have Chaldean neighbors, as well as American neighbors, and the children all play together. They take the bus to school together. On our street, you see Indians, Chaldeans, Polish, Americans—this mix is very good. They are all on the bus together. It is a small world.

Concerns, hopes and dreams

I hope that my oldest son might someday become a doctor or an engineer. He loves to play the guitar and says he wants to work in computers. My other son loves soccer and says he wants to be an engineer. My daughter wants to be a doctor.

My hopes are to see the families of my sons. I want them to marry good wives and to have a good family. I also would love for my children to be attached to the church—praying and being part of the church community.

Things that concern me are seeing children living apart from their families, and drugs—I hate these things. I like to see families living together. In America, the young men want to live separately or alone—I think this is bad. In Iraq, children would leave the home when they marry, but sometimes even after you marry you will still live at home with your family.

In Iraq, when you hear that someone is living alone, you think that is not good. If you want to live alone, that means you want to make a mistake, or you want to use your freedom to do bad things. You must learn to use your freedom together with the family.

Values

I think freedom means that you must respect others, respect yourself, and respect your body. This kind of freedom is good, but freedom without respect for others or for yourself—or without respect for your body or others' bodies—is bad. I think we must learn about sex, but it should not be used for free—it is good with love, but for free it is not good. I think we must teach each other to love before having sexual activity.

I am going to teach my children that freedom means respecting yourself and others.

I also want to teach my children the Christian principles of love, hope, faith, generosity; also good manners, and logic—these are the things I want to teach them.

I hope I can protect my children from mistakes. I want them to live together in community with the church in freedom, but I don't want them to live separately, in a bad situation. I am going to teach them these things.

I love to hear when other people say, “He is a good boy,” or “She is a good girl.”

Advice for other refugees

I would tell other refugees that the principles are the same as in Iraq, but the manner is different. You must stay with your principles, and you can change your ways. Some of the things you did in Iraq, you cannot do here, and vice versa, but the principles are the same.

When I came here, I did not have work for the first month. Then after I worked with a company for one year, I was laid off and did not have work for two months. But you must try to get work, and you must be reliable to get work.

For example, I cannot say, “I am a civil engineer—how can I work in a supermarket?” You must be flexible and reliable to find work, and you must try. Now my work is different from my education—so what? I make money with good manners, that's all.

One more thing: I hope that Iraq's future will be good, and the situation needs more help from the other governments. I am lucky that I lived in Iraq during the good times, but I think about the people who are now in Iraq, in Syria, Jordan, Turkey, without work, without anything. I think the governments must pay attention to this.

We hear the news about Iraq, just like the people in Iraq do. With a satellite dish, we get Iraqi TV, Arabic TV—you hear the news in the U.S. before the Iraqi people hear it, so that we are in contact with others in Iraq, and we suffer like them when we hear the news.

For example, yesterday I heard about some car bombs near my house in Iraq, about 200 feet from my house there, and I saw a picture of it on the TV. After that, I phoned my nephew, who is living in my house there. What can we do? Wherever you go in Iraq, there are bombs.

Basic Needs

When you hear that Iraqis only have electricity for 3 or 4 hours a day, you cannot understand how that feels to Iraqis, because the electricity here is available 24 hours a day. My kids feel this difference. When we arrived here, my daughter asked her mom, "Why doesn't the electricity stop here? It's on for 24 hours a day, not like in Iraq?" It's impossible to believe when you only have electricity for 3-4 hours a day, or if you don't have water in your home.

In life, there are primary and secondary requirements. The primary needs are food, water, etc., and the secondary needs are things like respect, success. When you don't have the primary requirements, it causes big problems. In psychology they say you are happy when you have both primary and secondary requirements, and you must have the primary requirements before you can look for the secondary requirements. You must eat to be happy.

I hate to hear about places where people don't have something to eat or drink, or don't have electricity and other basic services. This is not only an issue for Iraq—Sudan, Cambodia, other places. My hope is that people everywhere would have these basic requirements available to all.

Discussion Questions for Refugee Serving Agencies

1. What do you know about benefits and services available to asylees?
 - a. From Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), [Asylee Eligibility for Resettlement Assistance: A Short Guide](#)
 - b. Asylees can get information on a variety of service and benefit issues through the "Asylee Information and Refugee Hotline" at: 1-800-354-0365
2. What do you know about the processing of Iraqi refugees for resettlement in the U.S.?
 - a. From the U.S. Department of State / Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration, page on [Iraqi Refugee Protection and Assistance](#)
 - b. From RCUSA,
 - i. Compilation of recent [Summaries, Reports and Backgrounders](#) on Iraqi refugees
 - ii. Compilation of recent [U.S. Government Statements and Policy Announcements](#) related to Iraqi refugees (includes information on "Special Immigrant Visas")

3. What do you know about the situation of Chaldean Christians in Iraq?
 - a. The Chaldean Church: The Christians in Iraq
 - b. The Chaldean Federation of America
 - c. National Public Radio's audio article (March 13, 2008) on the death of Iraq's Chaldean Catholic Archbishop, Archbishop's Slaying Rocks Iraq's Christian Minority
 - d. From BBC News (March 13, 2008), Christians Besieged in Iraq, and Iraqi Christians Long History
4. What resources does your agency know of for helping refugees deal with loss and trauma?
 - a. From the Refugee Mental Health Program of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), "Points of Wellness" products
 - b. From the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, page on refugee mental health
 - c. The Refugee Experience: Psychosocial Training Module (includes Understanding the Psychosocial Needs of Refugee Children and Adolescents and Non-western Concepts of Mental Health)
5. How would you advise refugee parents who want to pass on their native language(s) to their children?
 - a. Center for Applied Linguistics, Raising Bilingual Children: Common Parental Concerns and Current Research
6. What advice do you give new refugee families about parenting practices in the U.S.?
 - a. BRYCS resource, Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook
7. For what medical care and federal benefits are refugees and asylees eligible, and for how long?
 - a. RCUSA Web page on Post Arrival Assistance and Benefits
 - b. USCRI's Resource Guide for Serving Refugees with Disabilities