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THE NEEDIEST CASES

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From Violence in Iraq to Hardships in Brooklyn

By Elizabeth A. Harris



Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

Fawzi Hasab and Zahra Nahim, who fled Baghdad after losing their sons in bombings.

On a warm December afternoon, Zahra Nahim stood in her narrow kitchen pulling flat ovals of bread out of the oven, piling plates with yellow rice and shredded chicken — and thoroughly dusting the front of her black [abaya](#) with white flour.

Ms. Nahim, an Iraqi refugee who lives with her husband in southwestern Brooklyn, was making lunch for some guests. The food was richly flavored, but the ingredients were simple, like rice and beans and raisins, and many of them had been bought with food stamps.

In America, Ms. Nahim, 59, and her husband, Fawzi Hasab, 55, have struggled with illness, language and poverty. But if you set foot in their home, they will drag a 50-pound bag of flour out of the pantry and get to work: you will be fed.

“This is like a treatment for our sadness,” Mr. Hasab said in Arabic through an interpreter, placing a hot loaf of bread on the table.

“We feel like we’re in a family, like we have family.”

In 2008, Ms. Nahim and Mr. Hasab, who are Shiite, lost their sons, Raed, 22, and Ali, 10, to sectarian violence in Baghdad. Their home and their car were bombed by a Sunni group, they said. Raed was in the car, and Ali was in the house at the time.

The couple fled Baghdad, where they had been born on the same day of the same month. They went to Syria and then, about two years later, came to the United States, where they were granted refugee status.

A United Nations agency placed Mr. Hasab and Ms. Nahim in Nashville, but the Arab community there was small, they said, and they felt alone. So they moved to Brooklyn to be near a relative.

They arrived with almost nothing: a few bags of clothes, a couple of household items — like a set of delicate blue teacups — and faded photographs.

One picture shows Mr. Hasab as a young man, with thick black curls and a warm, playful smile, leaning against a white sedan. Another shows their Baghdad home, its white brick wall streaked in black, shattered by a powerful blast.

They also came with memories of the violence that took their boys.

At the mention of their sons, Ms. Nahim tried to speak, but her voice quivered and her face sank slowly toward her chest. Her hands rose to cover her eyes, and she wept. Mr. Hasab rocked himself gently.

In Iraq, Mr. Hasab owned a grocery store. In Syria, he set up a barbershop. But in America, he does not speak the language — though he is taking English classes — and his health has begun to fail him. Ms. Nahim has diabetes, and their only income is \$472 a month from her disability benefits and food stamps.

With the help of [the Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, Mr. Hasab, who suffers bouts of anxiety and post-traumatic stress, is reapplying for disability benefits.

He was rejected once, but his caseworker, Anuja Khemka, said his problems were not made clear on his first application, which focused on physical ailments like arthritis. The new application is not their most immediate concern, though, Ms. Khemka said.

“I think their biggest problem is housing,” she said.

Mr. Hasab and Ms. Nahim live in the back of a modest home owned by an Egyptian woman, in a few small furnished rooms on the ground floor. She initially wanted \$1,100 a month in rent, but when she heard the couple’s story, she agreed to \$900, Mr. Hasab said. Still, they cannot afford the rent.

Last fall, the agency drew \$900 from the [Neediest Cases](#) Fund to cover the couple’s rent for one month. But their needs stretch further than that.

“They keep borrowing money to pay off their rent here and there, but it’s really unsustainable,” Ms. Khemka said. “You know how New York is: it’s really difficult to survive here.”

Ms. Khemka and her supervisor, Madeleine Dorval-Moller, have helped the couple apply for affordable housing and have written letters to local politicians asking to help expedite the process. But so far, there has been no progress.

In the meantime, Ms. Khemka and the Community Service Society have tried to assist Mr. Hasab and Ms. Nahim in finding some sense of community. Most of their relatives are in Iraq, and Mr. Hasab says it is hard to keep in regular contact because he and his wife do not have a computer.

Caseworkers have encouraged Ms. Nahim to take English classes at the [Arab American Association](#) and have helped her buy the necessary books.

She also applied to be a volunteer at the [Moroccan American House Association](#), where she hopes to read books to children in Arabic.

Ms. Khemka also gave Ms. Nahim, a big fan of Bollywood, a DVD of a movie starring her favorite actor, Raj Kapoor.

This winter, Mr. Hasab and Ms. Nahim visited the offices of the Community Service Society in Manhattan, their arms stacked with platters of homemade Iraqi food. The little they have, they wanted to share.

“They’ve done a lot of good for us,” Mr. Hasab said. “This is how we show we are grateful.”