

Building new lives far from Iraq

Now in Phila., he helps other refugees resettle.

By Michael Matza
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

As a translator for U.S. troops, Mohammed Mustafa al-Tamimi faced daily dangers in Iraq, including the bomb disposal mission that nearly took his life.

Now, six months after the arduous odyssey that brought him to Philadelphia, the lanky Iraqi refugee has an apartment in Malvern, a job in Center City, and the blessedly humdrum risk of a daily commute on the R5.

"Many times I was very close from death," said Tamimi, recalling the marketplace explosion in which he and his mother-in-law and sister-in-law were wounded by flying car parts.

"There, we couldn't plan even two days ahead," he said. "Here, I hope we can plan for the future."

Tamimi's wife, Hind; 3-year-old daughter, Laian, and mother, Majida, 65, live with him in the Philadelphia suburb they chose because it was near Hind's relatives who have lived here for decades.

Working as a case manager for Philadelphia's Nationalities Services Center, an immigrant-advocacy center, Tamimi helps refugees. See **REFUGEE** on A8



CHARLES FOX / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Mohammed Mustafa al-Tamimi, who was nearly killed during a mission as a translator for U.S. troops in Iraq, helps Iraqis settle here.

group, Tamimi, 30, draws on his recent experience to help resettle Iraqis in the Philadelphia area. Thirty-five have arrived since January, with more on the way as the U.S. implements policies designed to step up aid to Iraqis who have helped U.S. soldiers and other American interests in the war zone.

The Iraq Refugee Advisory Committee, about 90 Philadelphia-area activists drawn from NSC, the Catholic Church, the American Friends Service Committee and other groups, has been meeting since 2007 to promote Philadelphia as a reception center for these refugees.

Today from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Arch Street Meeting House, Fourth and Arch Streets, the group will host "Welcoming Iraqi Families, Celebrating Iraqi Culture," an event timed to coincide with World Refugee Day.

The group is a cross-section drawn from the region's "peace, faith, academic and corporate communities, coming together to support Iraqi resettlement in Philadelphia," said Juliane Ramic, NSC director of social services and a founding member of IRAC. "Partly it's our moral obligation. But when we look at the faces of these Iraqis, many have incredible potential to be contributing members of our community."

While some advocates have criticized the Bush administration for not admitting more of the estimated 2.5 million Iraqis displaced by violence since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, the refugee-admissions picture is rapidly changing.

According to the president's most recent report to Congress, 202 Iraqis were admitted in 2006. This year through the end of May, more than 4,600 were admitted, and the administration's goal is a total of 12,000 for the fiscal year ending Sept. 30.

Tamimi, an only child, sent his family on ahead to Jordan after his mother had a heart attack that doctors attributed to stress and his wife nearly miscarried following an explosion. Then he locked and painfully abandoned the family home that he was born in, still filled with furniture in Baghdad, as he escaped via the United Arab Emirates and Jordan.

Through the U.N. High Commission on Refugees and the International Organization on Migration, an intergovernmental group, the family was slotted to come to Philadelphia.

The resulting transition has been outwardly smooth and quietly wrenching, Tamimi said.

In the beginning there were so many details. He took the Pennsylvania driver's exam and applied for a license. He used the Internet to seek jobs in the field he trained in at Baghdad University — computer engineering — and settled for work as a Kmart clerk in Wayne just to earn money. He organized his personal papers so that in a year he can apply for permanent residency.

It wasn't the high-drama America he had come to know from action-adventure movies, he said, but it was peaceful.

"At last we were in the United States, where we could live safely in a better place for our little

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Refugee

daughter," he said, sounding like a man finally able to exhale.

But sometimes while riding the R5 rails, his mind flashes back to the two dozen or so Army translators who were hired when he was.

Many were killed, he said, either in military strikes or by the insurgents who have targeted anyone working with the Americans.

Snapping out of a flashback, he said, he sometimes looks around at the other commuters and wonders what they see in their daydreams.

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