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SUNDAY, JUNE 22, 2008

Welcoming Iraqi Refugees in the City of Brotherly Love

Yesterday (June 21st) I was invited to speak at the first-of-its-kind conference in the City of Brotherly Love. The Philadelphia-held conference was an open-borders event between the newly arrived Iraqi refugees to the Philadelphia area and their new American friends and neighbors.

The conference coincided with the June 20th [World Refugee Day](#) and was held by one of Philadelphia's oldest non-profit organization, the [Nationalities Service Center](#). Since it was founded in 1921, NSC made great achievements in terms of helping refugees from all over the world. It provides legal, social and educational services to immigrants, refugees, limited and/or non-English speakers.

The conference which was called "Welcoming Iraqi Families, Celebrating Iraqi Culture" was a step a great step NSC chose to take in order to build bridges between the American and Iraqi cultures. People from the two countries interacted and shared stories about their homelands. One of the Iraqi refugees, an artist, donated two paintings representing images from his home country, attracting a great admiration by the American Philadelphians who rarely get a chance to see Iraqi art. Others expressed their feelings about finding a new and safe home, and how they lived in their homeland before, during and after the war.

Most, if not all, of the Iraqis who attended the event were professionals who once had decent jobs in Iraq. They were university professors, doctors, artists, computer engineers, interpreters, and teachers. They shared their stories in a very emotional way, talking about how they were threatened and how they lost friends, family members, and relatives because of their connection either with the United States or basically their professions.

I had the opportunity to speak about my experience as former Washington Post correspondent who worked in an extremely dangerous environment and how I survived death three times while working in war-torn Baghdad. The event also included speakers from

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the American Friends Service Committee, a non-profit that carries out service, development, social justice, and peace programs throughout the world. Raed Jarrar, AFSC's Iraq Consultant, provided the audience with comprehensive details about the roots of violence in Iraq and why the world witnessed its highest refugee crisis since 1948. Also, AFSC's Peter Lems talked about activities and solidarity for the new Philadelphians.

During the lunch break, the attendees had the chance to attend a photo gallery. The photos presented were of Iraqis in different periods, starting from the few weeks that preceded the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and were taken by Linda Panetta, a brilliant professional war and crises photographer, who had been to Iraq several times and who has just come back from the Gaza Strip where she documented the humanitarian crisis the Gazans are going through in photos. The photos included mostly women and children, especially those affected directly by the war, those who were seen wounded in hospitals and those who lived miserably as squatters in former government buildings due to the soaring unemployment rate in Iraq.

While speaking with Linda, I was asked to help some of the organizers to help translate something to the Iraqi children who were all gathering around a long rectangular table, holding colorful crayons and painting things they love. I helped the organizers tell the children to draw what they know of Iraq and how they see it in their dreams. The drawings that were finally posted on wooden stands were chilling. They were of children playing, others dancing, and most of them included the well-painted Iraqi flag. A five-year-old girl told me that she was drawing herself, "a beautiful, young girl playing in Iraq." Her words chilled my entire spine. I thought if she had any idea where she was and if she would ever be able to see Iraq again.

It was an amazing feeling to see how Iraqis and Americans were welcoming each other and how bridges became very close and shorter than one would imagine. When William Penn named Philadelphia with its name in 1682, he knew that this city would become a melting point for many different cultures. Choosing a Greek name like 'Philadelphia' (meaning 'the one who loves his brother') was a perfect fit. Indeed, Philly is the City of Brotherly Love.

Labels: [Iraqi Refugees](#), [Philadelphia](#)

POSTED BY BASSAM SEBTI AT 8:02 PM 

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KEY LIST PROJECT ARTICLES:

- "A Safehouse for Iraqi Allies" by Kirk W. Johnson. The Los Angeles Times, 12/15/07
- "Betrayed" by George Packer. The New Yorker, 3/21/07
- "Hounded by Insurgents, Abandoned by Us" by Kirk W. Johnson. The New York Times, 4/18/07
- "Allies Left Behind?" by Lenny Bourin and Dan Harris. ABC World News, 7/15/07

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Very commendable posting and coverage of the meeting, and party. A positive event it seems no matter from what angle you view it. I am sure the participants left cheered and encouraged to achieve whatever they can either in the US or someday in their return to Iraq. Personally I don't doubt that Baghdad and Tehran will one day become center jewels of light for international culture in that part of the world. It is only a question of time.

Isn't there some hadith that says that all things come to him who has patience? In the meantime, the time spent waiting should be wisely spent. The value of each person's diversity and character doesn't matter whether it is appreciated in Philly or Mosul. An excellent character based on noble achievement is gold no matter where the cultural setting, the one true international currency **that never loses its value**

JUNE 29, 2008 9:20 PM

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