

Handout 1.2 - Three Stories

A Journey to Peace

For all he has lost in his flight from Iraq, Samir Aljuhily is reminded every day of just how much he has gained, how far he has come, each time he opens the door of his apartment without fear it will be rigged with bombs.

“Of all the things we have had to suffer, of all the things that are still missing, we feel happy and blessed,” said Aljuhily, a Mandaean refugee, who shares the two-bedroom apartment with his wife and four children.

Massachusetts is home to the country’s largest and fastest-growing number of Mandaeans, members of a non-Arab, pre-Christian race whose 60,000 people have been scattered worldwide since Iraq erupted in sectarian violence in 2006.

Mandaeans are a monotheistic people who revere John the Baptist; regard running water, such as rivers, as sacred; do not intermarry; do not accept conversions; and speak an ancient Aramaic language.

They also are pacifists who, in Iraq, have suffered murder, rape, and kidnappings by Islamic extremists, and by criminals who target the Mandaeans’s traditional success as jewelers, said Wisam Breegi, a Mandaean refugee who lives in Woburn.

A total of 380 Mandaeans have emigrated directly to Massachusetts since 2008, according to State Department figures. Mandaean leaders estimate that at least 50 more refugees have migrated to Massachusetts from other states. “This is a place where they can not only start, but flourish,” said Breegi, whose jewelry store in Boston’s Downtown Crossing serves as a resettlement assistance center.

In the last two years, Breegi has helped and advised most of the Mandaeans who have flocked to Massachusetts. The work, Breegi says, is a matter of cultural survival. “If we keep being scattered, if we don’t bring people in, it probably will be an actual death sentence to our culture, our faith, and our people,” said Breegi, 50, who arrived in Massachusetts in 1992.

Richard Chacon, executive director of the state Office for Refugees and Immigrants, said the Mandaean resettlement in Massachusetts came as a surprise.

“We weren’t as familiar with who the Mandaeans are,” Chacon said. “But they fit perfectly in what has been the narrative of this Commonwealth, in being a home for individuals of religious traditions who were forced out or persecuted in their own countries.”

Breegi said he wants to “build a society with all the bells and whistles.” His efforts began two years ago by approaching charitable groups, politicians, and government officials with slide shows, PowerPoint presentations, and pleas to investigate the plight of Mandaean refugees.

His drumbeat struck a chord with Lutheran Social Services, which encouraged Mandaeans to relocate to Worcester, a relatively affordable city where many of them live near downtown. In Worcester, resettlement officials said, Mandaeans have been steered to housing, jobs, schooling, and myriad other necessities of American life.

Most of the Mandaeans in Massachusetts, according to Breegi, state officials, and social workers, have found jobs, although many of them are entry-level, low-paying positions. Still, Breegi said, they are happy to be working.

“This has not happened in their lifetime: that they have a community that feels safe and is not persecuted,” said Jozefina Lantz, a Lutheran Social Services official who is Massachusetts director of the agency’s Services for New Americans.

Before Breegi called, Lantz said, “I had never heard of the Mandaean community.”

That obscurity has been a survival tactic for a people, desperate not to be noticed, whose last mass migration occurred 2,000 years ago, Breegi said. Since they moved to lands in present-day Iraq and Iran in the first century, Breegi said, the Mandaeans have suffered waves of persecution and massacre.

“We became a people of shadows,” said Breegi, who practiced veterinary medicine in Baghdad.

The Massachusetts connection happened by chance, said Breegi, who settled here only because he had corresponded with a resident of the state while still in Iraq. Breegi had no family in Massachusetts, but quickly became impressed with its educational and medical resources.

In the last two years, after the number of US-admitted Iraqi refugees increased dramatically, Breegi has helped as many Mandaean as he could with their initial needs in this country.

The United States regards all Iraqis who seek to flee that country as refugees, but screens each applicant to help ensure that terrorists and criminals are not admitted, according to Beth Schlachter, a State Department spokeswoman.

In Massachusetts, an expanding support system is helping steer increasing numbers to the state. Through Sept. 22, 113 Mandaeans had resettled in Massachusetts this year, more than double the number in Texas, the second most-popular destination in 2010.

One recent arrival to Massachusetts is Luay Abdulazeez, a Baghdad jeweler who says he was kidnapped in 2003 and held blindfolded for four days until his family paid a \$120,000 ransom.

“I see the freedom here,” said Abdulazeez, 35, who lives in Worcester with his wife and 5-year-old daughter. “It’s a very nice place.”

His new home also is a place with little free time. Abdulazeez rises at 6 a.m., commutes to Boston to train at Breegi’s store, returns to Worcester by 6:30 p.m., and attends classes at Quinsigamond Community College four nights a week.

“In my dream,” Abdulazeez said, “I want to be a lawyer.”

Mandaeans have always lived near one another, and establishing a community in a central location such as Massachusetts, Breegi said, is vital to preserving traditions that have been handed down through centuries.

Otherwise, Breegi said, “you may save the people, but you’ll kill the faith.”

“I’m very much worried,” agreed Aljuhily, who wears a long beard and braided hair typical of religious Mandaeans. “We’re all discussing the same thing.”

Although they use the many streams and natural water around Worcester for their rituals, Breegi said, Mandaeans lack a temple and a cemetery. They also fear their children will drift from the religion in a culture that is rife with distractions. Already, Aljuhily said, he has been visited by Jehovah Witnesses who handed him Christian literature written in Arabic.

“If we have a place to worship,” Aljuhily said, “we can be the beacon for all the Mandaean in the United States.”

Breegi shares a commitment to that ambitious goal.

“What we are building,” he said, “is the foundation of the Mandaean community in a new place after 2,000 years. This is majestic.”

(From a Boston Globe article, October 8, 2010 - http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/10/08/for_mandaeans_a_journey_to_peace/)

The Carteret Islands

With their boundless vistas of turquoise water framed by swaying coconut palms, the Carteret Islands northeast of the Papua New Guinea mainland might seem the idyllic spot to be a castaway.

But sea levels have risen so much that during the annual king tide season, November to March, the roiling ocean blocks the view from one island to the next, and residents stash their possessions in fishing nets strung between the palm trees.

“It gives you the scary feeling that you don’t know what is going to happen to you, that any minute you will be floating,” Ursula Rakova, the head of a program to relocate residents, said by telephone. The chain could well be uninhabitable by 2015, locals believe, but two previous attempts to abandon it ended badly, when residents were chased back after clashing with their new neighbors on larger islands.

This dark situation underlies the thorny debate over the world’s responsibilities to the millions of people likely to be displaced by climate change.

There could be 200 million of these climate refugees by 2050, according to a new policy paper by the International Organization for Migration, depending on the degree of climate disturbances. Aside from the South Pacific, low-lying areas likely to be battered first include Bangladesh and nations in the Indian Ocean, where the leader of the Maldives has begun seeking a safe haven for his 300,000 people. Landlocked areas may also be affected; some experts call the Darfur region of Sudan, where nomads battle villagers in a war over shrinking natural

resources, the first significant conflict linked to climate change... While all Pacific island states are expected to lose land, some made up entirely of atolls, like Tuvalu and Kiribati, face possible extinction.

“For the first time in history, you could actually lose countries off the face of the globe,” said Stuart Beck, the permanent representative for Palau at the United Nations. “It is a security threat to them and their populations, which will have to be relocated, which is the security threat to the places where they go, among other consequences.”

Scientific studies distributed by the United Nations or affiliated agencies generally paint rising seas as a threat. A 2007 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, detailing shifts expected in the South Pacific, said rising seas would worsen flooding and erosion and threaten towns as well as infrastructure. Some fresh water will turn salty, and fishing and agriculture will wither, it said.

Australia’s previous prime minister, John Howard, was generally dismissive of the problem, saying his country was plagued with “doomsayers.” But a policy paper called “Our Drowning Neighbors,” by the now governing Labor Party, said Australia should help meld an international coalition to address it. Political debates have erupted there and in New Zealand over the idea of immigration quotas for climate refugees. New Zealand established a “Pacific Access Category” with guidelines that mirror the rules for any émigré, opening its borders to a limited annual quota of some 400 able-bodied adults between the ages of 18 and 45 who have no criminal records.

But its position has attracted criticism for leaving out the young and the old, who have the least ability to relocate. Australia’s policy, by contrast, is to try to mitigate the circumstances for the victims where they are, rather than serving as their lifeboat.

The sentiment among Pacific Islanders suggests that they do not want to abandon their homelands or be absorbed into cultures where indigenous people already struggle for acceptance.

“It is about much more than just finding food and shelter,” said Tarita Holm, an analyst with the Palauan Ministry of Resources and Development. “It is about your identity.”

Ms. Rakova, on the Carteret Islands, echoes that sentiment. A year ago, her proposed relocation effort attracted just three families out of a population of around 2,000 people. But after last season's king tides — the highest of the year — she is scrounging for about \$1.5 million to help some 750 people relocate before the tides come again.

Jennifer Redfearn, a documentary maker, has been filming the gradual disappearance of the Carterets for a work called "Sun Come Up." One clan chief told her he would rather sink with the islands than leave. It now takes only about 15 minutes to walk the length of the largest island, with food and water supplies shrinking all the time.

"It destroys our food gardens, it uproots coconut trees, it even washes over the sea walls that we have built," Ms. Rakova says on the film. "Most of our culture will have to live in memory."

(Excerpted from a New York Times article, May 29, 2009 -

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/29/world/29refugees.html>)

Deported

Many couples fear immigration officers, but Asa and Tony have a particularly horrible story. Asa, a British citizen, was deported while trying to visit Tony in the U.S., and Homeland Security launched its own investigation of their relationship. Tony, forty and a denizen of Atlanta, Georgia, met Asa, thirty-three, during a vacation in Britain in early 2002. They fell in love, and, like many other couples, immediately faced a quandary: how to be together?

At the time, U.K. immigration laws gave residency to unmarried foreign partners of British citizens—but only after the couple had lived together for two years. The two therefore planned eventually to move to London, but since Tony had commitments to his own business in the U.S., they would need to demonstrate their cohabitation through Asa spending as much time as possible with him there. "I went to the INS," Asa says, "and they told me there was no limit to how often I could come in and out of the U.S. legally, as long as I don't overstay. So I would go in and out of the county every ninety days."

I spent the majority of my time during those two years in the U.S... While I was forced to quit my job in Britain to spend time in the States, I could not work, drive, own a cell phone or even a bank account in America—all the things most people take for granted. My partner was powerless to do anything to help. ... One of our major hurdles was that I had to live in America [to prove to the U.K.

that they had cohabited for two years], but I couldn't do so legally in the U.S.'s eyes. Yet, we had to build documentation that we were living together. We had to walk this fine line.

Still, Asa left every three months and remained legal. In 2004, having met the requirements, they resettled in London, where Tony got a new job. In June 2005, Tony had to return to the U.S. for an eight-week business trip—"which was a long time to be apart," Asa says. "We said I'd go there on holiday for two weeks [at the end of Tony's trip], and fly back together. Tony asked me if I was worried about coming into the country. Ironically, every other time I was horrified coming into the country, the most nerve-wracking experience. This time, I wasn't worried at all."

At the Atlanta airport, "I got to immigration. They asked me the standard series of questions: last time I was here, what I was here for—a holiday. I kept the answers as simple as possible. They put my passport in an orange folder, so I knew. They took me into another room."

That was the horrible experience in itself... There was an African woman who had a little baby and they were letting the baby into the country and not the mother. And then they had a few other people who'd been put aside for questioning as well. At least I spoke English— I could tell the translators weren't doing a proper job interpreting.

They asked details about me. I told them the hundred percent truth. I said I'm in a same-sex relationship, we live in the U.K., we transferred our lives there ... It was blatantly obvious to me that the questioning was homophobic. It's hard to explain... You knew they could do it because our relationship had no status, and the end result was that it all happened to me because I was in a same-sex relationship ... I guess I just wasn't human.

He asked me questions about our landlord when we had lived in San Francisco. Were they already investigating us? He told me that he didn't think I'd be let into the country. I said, "Don't do this to me."

They never said, You have been refused entry because. And I never actually asked, why aren't you letting me in. I just said, please, don't do this to me. I was given a refusal, and made to sign. The flights to the U.K. were all booked. They didn't think they could permit me to fly back to another E.U. country. They found a London flight leaving in a couple of hours, with one seat in first class—for \$5,000. I bought that. When my flight came up, I got escorted there by a Homeland Security officer and boarded onto the plane.

"The American government has singled gay people out for mistreatment," Asa says. "We have been careful to abide by every law and hurdle placed in front of us, and we are still being treated as criminals."

Tony waited hours for Asa to emerge—then waited for him to call when he got back to London that night. He remembers,

At 10 or 11 a.m. next morning, someone was banging on my door—two officers standing there, cars sitting in front of my house. I was shocked. But I knew what it was. Homeland Security.

[The agents] didn't want any pleasant communications. They informed me of my rights—I could have an attorney present; they recorded everything. I told them all they asked for. They wanted to know what my relationship to Asa was. I knew he'd already told them, so I told them the same.

They knew things about our relationship. We had moved to San Francisco for about a year. We'd signed a lease there, so we had both our names on it. Sitting in my house, they had the documentation: they asked about our landlords in San Francisco by name; "Did Asa live with you for the year?" I explained that no, he'd been doing it legally, leaving and entering every ninety days. They didn't believe me. They asked, "Where are you living now?" I said in London. Obviously, they didn't believe I was living anywhere but Atlanta, because I still own the house there. The line of questioning was: when did we meet; how long in was he in the U.S.; did I know that it was a violation of law if I let him live with me and if I harbored an illegal immigrant? They asked me how Asa supported himself in the U.S. They knew he didn't have a job in the U.K. "So he lives there but you pay all the bills?"

By coincidence or not, Tony says, "One or two weeks later, I got an internal revenue audit. That's still going on... I'm not at risk, but—I suspect that they're making sure that I didn't pay Asa."

"We never did anything that should have flagged us," Tony says. "Honestly, I love my country; if we could live in America tomorrow, I would want to come home. ...Our home is there. My family is there. Asa's family is spread out. He and I are here alone in London." And yet, Tony says, "they treat me so well over here, almost to the point that it freaks you out. It's the other side of the spectrum. You don't see any hate here. It's really nice."

(From a Human Rights Watch/Immigration Equality telephone interview with Asa and Tony (last names withheld at their request), January 5, 2006, and an e-mail from Asa to Human Rights Watch, January 5, 2006, as relayed in "Family Unvalued -

<http://www.immigrationequality.org/familyunvalued.php>)
