



ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH

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AN IRAQI INTERPRETER STATESIDE Family is Safe, Work Elusive

Daniel Sherr

When Youstra Al-Ani addressed the NAJIT annual conference in Pittsburgh this past May, recounting her experience as an Iraqi interpreter for Coalition Forces, two sentiments were palpable: empowerment and frustration. Empowerment, because a woman who had run a preschool program under Saddam Hussein discovered she had interpreting and translating skills that could be parlayed into a decent job at the highest levels of the command structure in Iraq. Frustration, because after fleeing Iraq with her family because her life was in danger, she was unable to continue working in the United States in her new profession. Above all, it was clear that this intrepid interpreter, who talked about situations of extreme violence and suffering with the utmost aplomb, has incredible coping skills.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein changed Youstra Al-Ani's life in many ways. She had spent some of her childhood years at an English boarding school while her British mother was receiving medical treatment. She had attended a British school in Lebanon. Nevertheless, under Hussein she was barred from applying for a civil service position because the regime mandated that both parents be Iraqi.

Fast-forward to 2003. Al-Ani's brother, Ali, was working for the U.S. military police. "How is it, working with the Americans?" she asked. "It's nice." "Can I get a job?" "No, it's too dangerous for you," he said. In 2004, a minibus with 600 kilos of TNT blew up, killing Ali. He left behind a wife and four children. Al-Ani went to file papers for her brother so that his family could receive some compensation. ("According to the Koran, a widow cannot leave her house for 40 days after the death of her husband. She is to have no contact with men. If it turns out she is pregnant, there might be some doubt about the paternity. In any case, my sister-in-law doesn't speak a word of English, so I had to go to make sure that proper benefits were paid to the family.")

As she navigated her way through Titan, the com-

pany that had contracted her brother, one official asked her, "Where did you learn your English?" Ten days later, she was working with the 82nd Airborne Division at Checkpoint 2, and soon after that was assigned to the Multi-National Security Transition Command under Lieutenant General David Petraeus. There she worked from 2004 through September 6, 2007. On September 7, she left the country.

"On the first day of work, when I was introduced to my boss, Colonel Hinton, I said, 'To be honest with you, I have never used a computer,'" Al-Ani recalled. "We had no computers, no technology, in 2003. So he said, 'That's okay. You will learn.'"

Al-Ani traveled every day from the Red Zone to the International Zone to act as a liaison between the top echelons of Iraqi and coalition forces. "I was working on the transitioning of responsibilities from the Coalition and the U.S. to the Iraqi government. I interpreted at high-level presentations on national security at joint meetings between the Ministry of Defense and three-star generals," she said.

American officers, who missed their families back home, would ask her to bring her son to work. "I ended up spending more time with the officers than with my family," she said. The close ties she developed with American officers later proved instrumental in getting herself and her family admitted to the U.S. The admission process included a letter of certification from a general regarding the services she had rendered.

Al-Ani was quite candid about the different types of interpreters working in Iraq, the Category Ones and the Category Twos. "The Category Ones lived in Iraq and were Iraqi citizens. They didn't have security clearance," she said. "The Category Twos were paid more, were on contract, and went home when their contract was up." According to Al-Ani, some of the latter were Egyptians and Sudanese who had lived in the United States for more than 20 years. They were not familiar with Iraqi culture or the intricacies of Iraqi Arabic. Some did not

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MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

This year's annual conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was a wonderful success. It was my great pleasure to meet new members and reconnect with old ones. The workshops received outstanding evaluations and feedback on the conference was mostly laudatory.

I would like to welcome Rob Cruz and Dr. Peter Lindquist to NAJIT's Board of Directors, and congratulate Dr. Lois Feuerle on her re-election to the board. Congratulations are in order for Rosemary Dann, Esq., who was once again appointed to the position of Secretary, as well as Peter Lindquist, who is filling the Treasurer position.

Sincere thanks to Laura Garcia-Hein, Esq., for her two years of exemplary service on the board. Thank you, too, to Dr. Alexander Rainof, who retired from the board this year. Alex was chair of NAJIT for four years, and contributed greatly to the progress our organization has made. The NAJIT board presented Alex and Laura with plaques in recognition of their service to NAJIT.

Many people helped to make NAJIT's conference such a success. The conference committee, chaired by Lois Feuerle, with Elena Bogdanovich-Werner, Carla Farrell-Frazier, and Vania Haam serving as members, deserve special thanks. Nominations committee chair, Susan Bilodeau; Sabina Michaels and Jeck Navarrete, Esq.; our elections committee co-chair, Albert Bork; Christina Courtright and Janet Bonet, who assisted during the absence of other elections committee members: all helped tremendously in the nominations and elections process and the passage of our by-laws.

The Honorable Judge Ida Chen gave an engrossing and inspiring speech. Conference participants were talking about Judge Chen's speech for days afterward, and many expressed an interest in having a panel of judges, with her and others, for next year's conference.

I'd also like to acknowledge our new executive director, Robin Lanier, and her administrative assistant, Christina Filipovic, for their outstanding contributions in making sure the conference ran smoothly and efficiently. Members raved about their knowledge, professionalism, and friendliness. Thank you, Robin and Christina!

The NAJIT board congratulates and welcomes Doina Francu and Dr. Laura Douglas to the SSTI board. The SSTI board elected Michael Piper, Esq., to serve as president. Congratulations, Michael!

I was delighted to meet NAJIT's 2008 scholars. They are truly a bright and inspiring group of young people. Thank you to the scholarship committee for selecting such outstanding candidates, and to Peter Lindquist for helping them make the most of the conference.

We would also like to express our gratitude to Nancy Festinger, who has provided years of invaluable service to NAJIT. The NAJIT board presented Nancy with a plaque in recognition of her devotion and countless years of volunteer service to NAJIT.

Finally, it is important to recognize all the NAJIT members who continue to generously share expertise and experience with their colleagues. I am honored to be working with such a fine group of people.

I'm looking forward to the coming year, as there is much work to be done. While there were some additional transition costs from the move this past year, NAJIT is on sound financial footing. We will be strengthening our advocacy efforts on a state and national basis. We need to continue to support legislation for court interpreter programs such as Senator Kohl's S.702, to authorize the Attorney General to award grants to state courts to develop and implement state court interpreter programs. The advocacy committee will continue to closely monitor pending legislation, and ensure that NAJIT's voice is heard. The committee, chaired by John Estill, has already begun

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NAJIT occasionally makes its member information available to organizations or persons offering information, products, or services of potential interest to members. Each decision is carefully reviewed and authorization is given with discretion. If you do not wish to have your contact information given out for this purpose, please let headquarters know and we will adjust our records accordingly.

NAJIT SUPPORTS IRAQI INTERPRETERS

Lillian Clementi

On June 9, NAJIT brought hope and practical advice to Iraqi interpreters recently arrived in the United States after death threats had forced them to flee their home country. NAJIT member James Plunkett spoke on behalf of the association at a Washington, D.C., career seminar designed to introduce the Iraqis to the U.S. job market and to the translation and interpreting professions.

Organized by Upwardly Global, a non-governmental organization that helps professional immigrants, refugees and asylees build meaningful careers in the United States, the event was supported by NAJIT and a wide range of other entities (see sidebar for a list of the partners). With 44 Iraqi professionals attending and over 100 American volunteers participating, the two-day event was well planned, well organized and well executed, and NAJIT can be proud of supporting it.

Practical skills

On the morning of June 8, attendees were introduced to the U.S. job market and learned how to give a 30-second marketing pitch or “elevator speech” and to respond effectively to typical job interview questions. In the afternoon, each Iraqi was paired with an American volunteer for two hours of résumé editing based on guidelines provided by Upwardly Global. By the end of the day, each jobseeker was armed with a working elevator speech and a U.S.-style resume to use in networking at an employer breakfast the following morning.

Attendees also participated in mock interviews with American volunteers and had small-group counseling with Upwardly Global staff. The afternoon featured industry-specific panels, including a plenary session on translating and interpreting that featured speakers from NAJIT, the State Department, the American Translators Association, and the Association of Language Companies.

Translating and interpreting in the U.S.

The translating and interpreting panel was well received by the Iraqi attendees, who were encouraged by the focused, hands-on information the speakers provided. Panelists struck a delicate balance between making the attendees aware of the skill gap they needed to close in order to reach the higher levels of the industry in the U.S. and offering advice on finding entry-level work to build on their war zone interpreting experience and help them get on their feet in the short term.

Speaking on behalf of ATA, Esther Diaz opened the panel with an introduction to the translating and interpreting professions, including necessary skills and education, credentialing, and U.S. employment trends. She also provided a wealth of concrete information on getting started in community and telephone interpreting. Patricia Arizu, chief of the interpreting division of the State Department’s Office of Language Services, outlined the various types of interpreting at State and focused especially on areas where the Department’s needs match the Iraqis’ skills. Randy Morgan of the Association of Language Companies highlighted areas of demand in the industry, skills in demand among language companies, and suggestions on succeeding in the U.S. market.

NAJIT’s speaker

James Plunkett, a certified judiciary interpreter and foreign language coordinator for the Superior Court of the District of Columbia, gave attendees an overview of court and legal interpreting and the skills and credentials these fields require. Engaging, well informed, and funny, he was an extremely effective speaker and a credit to NAJIT. Together with the three other speakers, Plunkett generously stayed for nearly an hour after the session ended to answer attendees’ questions and talk with them individually.

Positive Feedback

Upwardly Global staff members were uniformly enthusiastic about the session, and the Iraqi attendees were equally warm in praising the panel. “It was a privilege to meet such a professional group,” one participant wrote. “[You] motivated us to pursue a decent career, so thank you very much for every one who participated in the Career Summit for Iraqi Professionals. I hope we can show you soon that your hard effort will bring the good result.”

Meeting the Iraqi refugees and hearing their stories is a moving and powerful experience. In general their English is good, and many have impressive backgrounds in areas that include engineering, information technology, project management, and medicine. At least one was a career translator and interpreter before the invasion of Iraq. As a group they are intelligent, professional, highly motivated, and eager to work towards a successful new life in the U.S. Almost all were resolutely upbeat, and most brought a marvelous sense of humor to the considerable challenges they face.

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AN IRAQI INTERPRETER STATESIDE *continued from page 1*

write Arabic. Al-Ani was being paid \$750 a month, while her U.S.-based counterparts made \$188,000 a year. A good knowledge of Iraqi Arabic was necessary, she said, to be able to distinguish between the Iraqi *egil*, a slap on the face, and the Egyptian *egil*, a baby cow. “Now,” she says, “it’s much different. Any interpreting candidate is given a strict oral proficiency interview, a very hard test.”

Two Iraqi veterans present at Al-Ani’s talk concurred with her assessment of interpreting quality in the past. “We had interpreters there who were U.S. citizens and not always suitable for the job,” one noted. “The defense and intelligence communities often value irrelevant issues of security over competence.”

Danger was an integral part of Al-Ani’s existence. “We interpreters were not good elements in the eyes of the insurgents and the Mehti Army,” she said. “Sometimes I would go to work by bus, other times by car; some days I would walk. Every day I would go through a different checkpoint.” Various interpreters present at al-Ani’s presentation were surprised that the U.S. soldiers she was working with didn’t provide protection, but a veteran in the audience remarked, “Believe me, if you want to be safe in Baghdad, you don’t want to be surrounded by Americans.”

“My neighbors were very nosy,” Al-Ani recalled. “‘Where is your Mom? Were did your Mom go?’ they would ask my children. Every day I had to tell my children a different story in case the neighbors would ask.” To this day, her youngest child, Ali, who is five, will not admit that his mother worked for Coalition Forces. (To hear a recent feature from an NPR affiliate on Al-Ani’s children and their experience in the U.S., click on <http://stream.publicbroadcasting.net/production/mp3/kplu/local-kplu-716397.mp3>)

Al-Ani was particularly concerned about her third child, Abdullah, 7, who has Down’s Syndrome. “They strap explosive belts on them and send them out as suicide bombers.” Al-Ani sometimes would take her son to his aunt’s house near a division headquarters in Al-Jadria. “There he would be surrounded by thick walls with huge cement blocks. They couldn’t get to him there. A whole division was surrounding the house. Also, my son has difficulty breathing, he needs an air cooler, and they had electricity there.”

“When my husband said, ‘Be careful,’ I said, ‘Don’t worry,’ but when it happened to my closest friends— one was shot in front of his house and one was kidnapped and killed— that’s when my fears started.”

In October of 2007, after paying \$380 per family member for exit interviews with U.S. authorities in Syria, she, her husband, and three of her children were admitted to the U.S. with special immigrant visas. Al-Ani has finally scraped together the money to bring over her eldest son, 18, who is still in Iraq. “I left him with my father,” Al-Ani explained, “but my father says to him, ‘Don’t go here. Don’t go there. It’s too dangerous.’ Now he’s dying to come to the U.S. The other day he said over the phone, ‘Mom, it’s like a prison here.’”

There is no question that the move to the States has been beneficial to Al-Ani’s children. “My children go to school with no car bombs. Their life has changed,” she said. As for Abdullah, she observes, “In Iraq we don’t have schools for children with special needs. Here he gets to play with other children.”

Auburn, the Seattle-area community where Al-Ani and her husband, Qasim Al-Zubaidi, took up residence, has shown great

solidarity in supporting the family. Nevertheless, the professional prospects for this interpreter skilled in Arabic and English terms for Humvee spare parts have proved bleak. Some defense contractors told her that they only hire American citizens. Unable to find work as an interpreter, Al-Ani has been working as a caretaker and a swimming instructor and lifeguard trainer (“At one point,” she said, “I won the Middle East Swimming Championships.”) She stated that she would go back to Iraq for better-paid interpreting work if more lucrative work in the States could not be found.

In the meantime, she urged the audience, “Let us pray for the people of Iraq. Lord help them to unite, support, and love one another.”

Postscript

In late June, I caught up with Yousra Al-Ani in Virginia. She had just finished a second round of tests with Global Linguistic Solutions. “Now I go back to Seattle,” she said, “and the next time they call, it will be to ship out.” The decision to go back to Iraq, she says, was her only option. “It’s been so long. The bills keep coming in. I can’t just wait. We need to stand on our own feet. Here in Virginia, I’ve run into many of the interpreters I was working with in Iraq. We’ve all been getting subsidies from the Department of Social and Health Services of Washington State. We’re all going back.”

She has given the matter much thought. “First of all, I’ll be serving this country. At the same time, I’ll be helping the people of Iraq.” In addition, she will be earning “twelve times what I used to get in Iraq.” Al-Ani will also be much closer to her father, who still lives in Baghdad. “I won’t be able to see him, though, because we have been told not to leave the base under any circumstances. But at least it will be cheaper to call him. I’ll call him every day.” When Al-Ani gets American citizenship, years from now, she plans to bring her father to the States. ▲

[The author is a frequent contributor to Proteus.]

Note: NAJIT is considering organizing Arabic-language court interpreting seminars for Iraqi interpreters now residing in the U.S. NAJIT’s advocacy committee is preparing position statements on a newly enacted law and on a bill pending before Congress affecting Iraqi translators and interpreters.

NAJIT SUPPORTS IRAQI INTERPRETERS *continued from page 3***What you can do**

Upwardly Global has already launched fund-raising efforts for the next career seminar, slated for late August or early September, with the location still to be determined: San Francisco and Chicago are possible sites. NAJIT will help identify speakers who can help replicate the successful panel at the Washington event. If you can recommend or can offer to be a NAJIT speaker, please contact robin@najit.org. If you’re interested in volunteering for the fall career summit or mentoring an Iraqi refugee, Upwardly Global needs you. Contact them at the URL in the sidebar on page 3. ▲

[Lillian Clementi is the owner of Lingua Legal, a translation practice specializing in law and commerce. She works from French and German into English. Contact: Lillian@LinguaLegal.com.]