

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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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.

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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. ▲

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