

Striving for a better life

El Paso County refugee community braces against national, local backlash

BY JAKOB RODGERS • THE GAZETTE



CHRISTIAN MURDOCK, THE GAZETTE

Iraqi refugee Kareem Alshami makes a cup of tea while working in his restaurant Arabian Nights this month in Colorado Springs. He washed dishes in a hospital and cashiered at a couple of 7-Eleven stores after arriving in Colorado Springs in 2013 until he could start his business.



PHOTOS BY CHRISTIAN MURDOCK, THE GAZETTE

Joe, 14, wears the scars of war on his forehead while his mother, Jinan Mardan, talks about life in Baghdad at dinner this month in their Colorado Springs home. Joe was injured during a bombing in Baghdad when he was 2 years old. The refugee family fled Iraq and came to Colorado Springs in 2014.



Jinan Mardan, center, serves an Iraqi dinner for her sons, Joe, 14, left, and Mike, 12, this month at their Colorado Springs home.



Iraqi refugee Kareem Alshami works in his restaurant Arabian Nights this month. He washed dishes in a hospital and cashiered at a few 7-Eleven stores after arriving in Colorado Springs in 2013 until he could start his own business.

Hints of cinnamon and cardamom drift through Kareem Alshami's Colorado Springs restaurant, bearing promises of kubba labannia, beef and chicken kabobs. The spices come from the Middle East, shipped especially for this slender man with curly, salt-and-pepper hair. Some of the delicious scents are readily identifiable, others more mysterious. He is asked what they are. A smile steals across his face. "This is love — you know love? We put love into our ..." he says, before breaking into laughter, leaving secret the rest of his ingredients. Alshami fled originally from Iraq, escaping persecution for his religious beliefs. He's one of hundreds of refugees who have settled across Colorado Springs and the Pikes Peak region in the past several .

They typically live in relative anonymity — many work long hours at low-paying jobs, shuttling children to and from school and navigating the customs and culture of a new land.

Many are families — some of them with children born in refugee camps they called home for decades before arriving stateside. Almost none of them can return home and expect to live in peace, due to war, genocide or religious persecution.

For Alshami, it's about ensuring his children survive their childhood.

“I started not for me — for my kids,” Alshami said. “When they're happy, I'm happy. That's my dream.”

As a community, refugees were thrust into an unwanted spotlight more than two months ago when Colorado Springs police say an Iraqi man shot a police officer in the head. The suspected shooter, Karrar Al Khammasi, remains jailed without bond while the officer, Cem Duzel, remains hospitalized in Englewood.

The shooting brought a sense of dread for refugees and their advocates, particularly at a time when President Donald Trump has stoked fears about refugees while cracking down on legal and illegal migration, arguing that immigrants are taking American jobs and the U.S. is importing too many criminals and terrorists.

Immigration attorneys, refugee advocates and state officials say typical refugees far more commonly resemble Alshami, the Iraqi father and restaurateur.

Gunmen sent a ‘message’

“Please, sit down,” Alshami insists.

Alshami escapes to the kitchen of his restaurant, Arabian Nights Cafe. Water babbles down a small fountain by the front door. Artwork from the Middle East hangs in every direction.

He returns with a golden pot and two tea cups. Black tea with cardamom steeps at the table. He loves this tea.

“You can smell it, it tastes good,” he says.

Call it a taste of his childhood home, Baghdad. He grew up there with four sisters and one brother before graduating from a university with a degree in business management.

Most of his 20s were spent fighting in the Iran-Iraq War — years, he said, that “destroyed my youth.” But the war's end brought a more pleasant life — one spent helping run his father's automotive parts store, and opening a restaurant serving typical Middle Eastern and Turkish food.

It all crumbled in 2005.

One day, gunmen — no longer tolerant of his religious beliefs — fired shots into his home. It was a “message,” he said, plain and simple. So he fled to Syria.

“I'm afraid not for me, but for my kids,” Alshami said. “I left everything — my store, my home — everything.”

He lived for seven years in the Syrian city of Aleppo, then a bustling metropolis of nearly 5 million people that hosted tourists flocking to see ancient ruins from the Silk Road that connected Asia and Europe about 2,000 years ago. But his time there was frustrating.

Unable to work because of his status as a refugee, he relied on the generosity of others and assistance from his brother and sister back in Iraq to feed his two sons, ages 4 and 1 at the time of their arrival. Charities supplied the most basic of foods, such as rice and oil.

Alshami tried coming to the U.S. But he said doing so was difficult, and he wasn't successful.

He fled once more when the Arab Spring protests erupted in 2011 — a moment that plunged Syria into civil war, and that began Aleppo's tragic slide into devastation. The city gained a new reputation as the site of the war's most horrific humanitarian crisis because of repeated bombings and chemical attacks aimed at civilians.

This time, Alshami fled with his children to neighboring Turkey — a place where refugees have typically had an easier time of gaining entry into the U.S., he said.

It took two years to finally get to the U.S., where he's seeking citizenship.

"Here I'm safe," he continued. "Me and my kids, that's what I want. That's it. This is my home."

Living in fear

More refugees living in El Paso County are from Iraq than any other country.

Since fall 2010, about 220 Iraqis made the county their first home in the United States, and an additional 30 Iraqi refugees moved here from another state and sought services, according to the Colorado Department of Human Services, which oversees refugee resettlement programs across the state.

An additional 109 people came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and 100 people hailed from Bhutan.

In all, about 650 refugees in that time resettled in El Paso County from 21 countries — almost all from Asia, the Middle East or Africa. This does not include others who arrived with Special Immigrant Visas for helping U.S. troops at war, often in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The arrivals since 2010 are described as a diverse, hardworking group who survived unimaginable atrocities and are eager to find work and build a life of safety.

Jinan Mardan, 46, survived multiple bombings during the Iran-Iraq War — one of which left a scar on her face. More bombings — this time, during the United States' war in Iraq — wounded her and her eldest son, Joe.

She and her family fled in 2014 after receiving several death threats, for reasons she requested not be shared for her family's safety.

"I just try as much I can to protect my kids," Mardan said. "I don't want my kids to live my life."

Another refugee — a man from Burundi — spent about 20 years in a Tanzanian refugee camp after having endured the deaths of the rest of his family. He fled repeated coup d'états that gripped his native country

and the genocide of one ethnic group that left 300,000 people dead. It was in those refugee camps that he met his future wife, with whom he had two children while waiting to return home.

His pleas to the United Nations were answered about two years ago when his family came to the United States as refugees and settled in Colorado Springs. They've since had two more children — the youngest of which was born six weeks ago.

He balked in alarm at the idea of having his name and photograph printed in the newspaper. He wasn't alone.

Numerous other refugees declined through their immigration attorneys, or through refugee advocates, to speak to The Gazette. Some feared sharing details of their lives that could endanger relatives back home. Others feared publicizing their stories at a time when anti-refugee sentiments have gained traction across the nation.

Those concerns also have been heightened by the Trump administration's efforts to significantly limit the number of refugees accepted by the United States, and the resources immigrants can receive once they arrive.

Most recently, Trump set a 30,000-person limit on refugees entering the U.S. in the coming year — a 15,000-person drop from last fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30. The U.S. has typically accepted the lion's share of refugees resettled around the world, though 2017 marked the first time since at least 1980 that the U.S. resettled fewer refugees than all other countries combined.

In all, about 19.9 million refugees lived across the world in 2017, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

“With all that's going on after the election, and the ban on the refugees, everyone is pretty much keeping a low profile,” said Kamel Elwazeir, 42, a Qatari immigrant, who helps refugees at the Islamic Society of Colorado Springs' mosque.

“They don't want to be out in public speaking out in regards to their situation. The fear of being deported, the fear of being retaliated against or attacked in public because of just addressing the newspaper or the media.

“And these people went through a lot to be here. So they're not willing to jeopardize their status by anything that will put them in danger.”

Starting at the bottom

Data and reports commissioned by the Colorado Department of Human Services offer glimpses into El Paso County's broader refugee community.

Like Alshami — whose two sons attend high school locally — most refugees arrive as families or join family members living here.

A third of them were ages 26 through 40 when they arrived, and a quarter of them were children or teenagers.

One out of every five refugees who arrived in Colorado last year did so with at least a bachelor's degree on their resume, the state report said. Almost all of them came ready to work.

Everyone who was old enough to work in El Paso County found a job, according to the Colorado Department of Human Services. Ninety percent of the time, they kept that job for at least three months — usually, far longer.

Slightly more than a third of them worked in the accommodations or retail food industries, and nearly a quarter of them found jobs in administrative support, waste management or remediation services. Other refugees worked in retail, construction and manufacturing.

Together, their hourly earnings averaged \$11.49, or \$1.29 above minimum wage, according to state data.

“When you’re talking about refugees, you’re talking about somebody who arrives at the country and has nothing,” Elwazeir said. “So automatically, this person has needs, and is going to require a lot of attention.”

For a while, Alshami made even less: \$1,400 a month.

He worked as a dishwasher at both Memorial Hospital campuses, and he soon got a second job as a cashier at a couple of 7-Eleven stores. It was barely enough to afford food and an apartment, he said.

There were other hurdles. He laughs now at the memory of not even knowing about Walmart and other job opportunities.

“For the beginning, it’s good to see that someone helps you,” Alshami said. “I come here like a strange man — you cannot know everything.”

Help came from Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains, the nonprofit in charge of resettling refugees in southern Colorado.

The nonprofit signed him up for Medicaid, food stamps and English classes, Alshami said.

The agency also helps refugees find jobs, and it offers some money to cover living expenses — all to ensure each refugee resettles successfully. And the nonprofit hosts cultural classes to help refugees adjust to America, such as explaining the concept of Walmart.

Refugees, as well as their advocates, say the money is well spent.

For every dollar spent helping refugees resettle here, \$1.68 was generated in economic activity, according to a May report commissioned by the Department of Human Services.

That figure grows exponentially when considering the wages that those refugees earn once working — shooting to \$21 to \$25 dollars for every \$1 spent helping refugees resettle here, the report states.

State and local governments also appear to get a tax revenue boost from welcoming refugees. Refugees who settled here in 2007, for example, generated \$1.23 in tax revenue for every \$1 spent helping them resettle.

“We have seen that refugees in Colorado Springs have thrived here,” said Floyd Preston, program director for the nonprofit’s refugee and asylee program. “When refugees first get here, they don’t go into housing — they’re paying rent just like you and I would. And with two or three jobs, they’re already paying taxes.

“Refugee resettlement is something that we as a community should continue to look at, because I think it enriches us as a community.”

‘This is my dream’

These days, some might call Alshami a spendthrift — if only for his boys.

Computers. Video games. The list goes on.

After all, they suffered enough for nine years of their childhood, he said. That shouldn’t have to continue in America.

“I give them everything they like,” he said. “I am working here for them, not for me. So I want to give them everything they wanted, always.”

And these days, he can.

He used money from the sale of his former restaurant in Iraq to open his restaurant in northern Colorado Springs. He works there six days a week, often more than 10 hours each shift.

It’s a blessing that distinguishes Alshami from many other refugees, Preston said. Most, particularly those not from Iraq or Afghanistan, arrive in the United States without savings, wealth or belongings beyond the clothes in their suitcases. They work hard now so that their children can thrive someday.

“We do see that the Afghans and Iraqis do thrive in the area of owning their own business, owning homes right away,” Preston said. “We see that, again, because they have been very progressive in their own nations.

“Some of our other refugees — from the Congo, Cubans and Central African Republic — it takes time for some of them to get to that point.”

Sitting there, Alshami surveyed all he had.

He saw tables ready for the evening dinner rush. A television played beside him, while an Arab-speaking commentator dissected the latest soccer tilt between Croatia and Spain.

He works hard. But, he says, it’s a small price to pay to provide a new life for him and his two sons.

“I make that not for me — it’s for them,” he said. “And this is my dream — I open some business and I get to be the owner and in USA. This is my dream.”