I come from Iraq and left my family because I would not accept living in the conditions of war any longer.

I had just finished high school.
You may see me on the street walking my host family's dog, Max.
My city was a small, very diverse area that belonged to the oil refinery. It consisted of different sects and religions—Shiite, Sunni, Christians, Yazidi and Mandaeans—all living peacefully and in harmony until the war started.
My family still lives in the middle of these people as the only Shiite family.
In 2007 the sectarian violence started. This is when people started staying away from each other. Out of fear, they became intolerant of each other’s beliefs.

In the beginning the insurgents targeted specific religious groups to divide people within a community. This is the best way to control people, to create circumstances where they fight against each other.

Everyone Shiite and members of other non-Sunni religious groups left the area, and people who supported Al-Qaeda set up bases in my neighborhood amongst civilians who were mostly Sunni.
We were asked to leave because we were Shiite. Our neighbor was beheaded and left on the front door because he was Shiite Muslim who continued to live in the Sunni area.
My dad was paralyzed after the 1991 war. He had a tumor on his spinal cord. I was six years old. We took him to different hospitals.

When he found the tumor, he checked where the best place was to get his operation because it was on his spinal cord and he didn’t have much money and the whole health care system was bad during the sanctions. We don’t know if the tumor was caused by war, because there were so many cluster bombs that bombed the area close to the refinery, or if it was because he worked in an oil refinery, a place with lots of chemicals.
The doctors said, “We have to do surgery; we have to remove this tumor.” In Iraq they didn’t have the best technology. Due to war and sanctions, many of the best doctors had left. Then, doctors also don’t have enough supplies. It’s a tough situation being a doctor in a warring country. They did the surgery.

I remember visiting the operating room after they were done, and I remember him lying on his stomach not able to move. My mom said that he’d be sick for a long time. We were very sad, but we just thought he would just be sick and then get better. My mom was always crying, but she didn’t tell us anything.
Nobody knew. We saw her many times on the prayer mat, praying and sobbing. My mother, my three sisters and I went to the hospital to see him. I saw the stitches. Then the nurse came to take out the stitches from his spinal cord. Just from seeing that, I was in trauma for many days. I didn’t eat and I cried often. I didn’t want to talk to anyone. It was very sad for me, but I didn’t want to express it. I did not want to make it harder for my mom.
We left him in the hospital to sleep, on his own. My mom couldn’t leave us home alone; we were all too young, so nobody could stay. I think my eldest sister Zaineb was in second grade. We stayed home, four girls and my mother. On Eid day, the celebration at the end of Ramadan, my mom said, “We need to go visit him.” So I decided to dress up in my dress that was donated to me. This dress was embroidered, with the days of the week. My hair was in pigtails. I was going to see my father. I hadn’t seen him in months.
My sister used to hug my dad’s clothes and cry. My mom pulled her and said, “No, he’s okay, don’t do this.” My mom couldn’t see this; she started to cry too. My sister said, “Why are you crying?” “I don’t know.” I was really young and I still remember this. I was around six years old.
When we got there, he was sleeping. His head was shaved. We couldn’t recognize him. Then we saw the wheelchair beside him. He opened his eyes, and seeing us, burst into tears. He shared the room with three other patients.

“There are big cockroaches at night. They climb on my neck. All we have here is lentil soup, for all meals.” My mother brought okra stew and kleicha (cookies stuffed with dates) to share with the other patients. My sisters and I helped her to cook.
My dad is emotionally abusive now. He has been in the wheelchair for seventeen years. My mom became both the father and the mother, filling both roles. Since he was paralyzed, he couldn’t get groceries or take me to the grocery store in the basket on the back of the bike like before, when we used to sing “Wa 3ada al-liel,” meaning, “The night has gone.”

My mother was a nurse before, and needed to stop working to take care of him.
The doctor came in and said, “Your father will be in a wheelchair, and he’ll use this for some time. I want you to take care of him very well.” Then we saw he was using a urinary sack, and we were really shocked. When we saw the wheelchair we thought, “This is really cool, this is a moving chair!” But we got used to it.
After he moved from the hospital, he couldn’t move. We learned how to take care of him, like when he needed somebody to empty the urine bag for him or bring him food and water. We were young, going from hospital to hospital.
This whole experience made an impact on me. I became really interested in medicine, especially doing surgery. I hoped to be part of changing the healthcare system by going to medical school and practicing medicine. I saw how it’s important to have this care in Iraq.

I have seen women giving birth on mats on the floor, because there wasn’t enough room in the hospital.
My sister also has epilepsy.

When you go to hospitals in Iraq, you see all these people with neurological disorders, you see deformed newborns, and you don’t know what could cause large numbers of people to have these problems. Bombs, chemicals, radiation...we aren’t sure where these diseases come from. Some are more complicated cases. You look at it, and it makes you cry.
We have really good physicians in Iraq, but we don’t have enough medical supplies or technology. We didn’t even have Internet access until 2003, due to sanctions by the USA and United Nations.
Sometimes I want to go to sleep, but instead I stay up very, very late - perhaps until four or five a.m.

Sometimes I can't even sleep.
I'm not like normal people. I cannot just rest. When I sleep, I see bloody things, like horror movies. Movies like "Saw."

Crazy things.
My sisters are much better than I am. They are more patient. Jamila (my third sister) had the most things happen to her. She got married, and before that she played the male role of the family. For example, when we needed the gas tank filled, we would all stand in a big long line. The weather was so hot Jamila and I would both go to roll the gas tank to the place it was filled. For me, I got very sick of crowds, and would go home. I left and she stayed there. It was really hot— if you stood there without shoes, you got your feet toasted. She waited with all of the kids and men – you never saw women bringing the gas tank, because it was too heavy.
Coming home, we became sad seeing my dad in the wheelchair, because this used to be his job.

He’s always down, always depressed. If I told him “You need some counseling,” he would get mad because of the stigma surrounding it.
Maryam (my fourth sister) also took responsibility for the family. While my dad was getting used to his wheelchair, she pushed him around and took him to his office. He worked in a place that was a 45-minute walk away. Sometimes he had a flat tire, so he would call her and say, “Come, and bring the air pump and tools. I have a flat tire!” She would run them to him. She would come back and I’d see her face very red from the heat. We took turns doing this job, in addition to other tasks like emptying urine bags, washing his clothes, doing physical therapy for him.

In 2010, Maryam started nursing school. She is still finishing school.
My oldest sister, Zainab, is a chemical engineer now. She was always very sensitive, very ambitious. She wanted to go to Denmark and study, but it just didn’t work. She went to a college in Tikrit during the sectarian violence, and she suffered a lot because of her Shiite name in a Sunni dominated area.
Zainab has epilepsy. She still takes medicine, which has very bad side effects. She gets diaphoretic at night (meaning she sweats a lot), and suffers weight loss, loss of appetite, hair loss, agitation and more. She doesn’t go to the doctor often, because driving to Baghdad is a big risk, simply to go to the doctor. If you are at a checkpoint with stopped traffic, you don’t know if a car might explode and kill everyone.
I sleep for maybe five minutes then I jump out of bed. I see a grave or a murder.
It's not easy for me to just sleep, to eat, or even to have an appetite. I sometimes just force myself to eat, but I get full very quickly.

These things I can never explain to my host family.
Zainab and I always used to wake up and listen to Fairuz, the “morning parrot” as called by many people. We took turns waking up early and making breakfast for my father: tea, pita bread, cream cheese or eggs and carrot jam.

My dad is the only one in the family who drinks coffee, so we had to learn how to make it for him. We would have to start from scratch by grinding coffee beans and then doing the other steps. Arabic coffee is very dark and so bitter. The smell was so strong that I felt it piercing in my nose. I remember the only time I drank coffee was when my sisters and friends did some palm readings for fun.
When I was in primary school, I sometime went to school at the same time dad went to his office, so I would take him halfway to his work, then head to school.

My school yard was fenced with a beautiful black fence. It reminded me of UK building design; it was a fancy fence to me. Sometimes when I played in the schoolyard with other kids at age eight or older, my friends would suddenly see my father in his wheelchair back from work by our school, so they would yell my name and let me know.
I left the school secretly many times during my break to help him back home. My friends wouldn’t tell because they liked him and even helped him sometimes when they ran into him in the street. He kept candy with him and gave it to the kids whenever they helped him. I was surprised many times when I was with him and saw other kids I didn’t know come and say hi to him.

He was known in the oil refinery neighborhood as “the wheelchair guy.”
My father spent lots of money visiting doctors and going from a hospital to another. In school we had to make donations when we started a new class, or sometimes we had to pay extra tuition for books or for pens. So whenever I asked mom for money for the class, she told me “Tell your teacher my dad is the wheelchair guy.” The teacher understood that and I didn’t have to pay the extra charges. I felt so sad as a child every time they collected money from the class because I knew I was different. I learned to accept it.
When we were teenagers, my dad’s friend wanted to marry one of my sisters, despite my parents’ disagreement with his proposal. He came every night to persuade my parents. He came late. He smoked and talked a lot with my dad. Whenever there was curfew he left his car and walked back home. People assumed that my parents were letting him sleep with my sister, which in Iraqi culture is shameful and this was not true.
He said to my family “If you want to stay alive, you have to give me one of your daughters.” My dad was not the kind of person who would do that. But the man forced my dad in many ways. “You know you are still in this area and you don’t have anybody. My friends in Al-Qaeda were talking about you and asked why you stay here. I told them, “I’m his friend, I’m gonna marry their daughter! This family is not a threat for us. Their father uses a wheelchair so he can’t leave the city.”
After some time, he married my sister, Jamila. She was 15 years old, and he was 24 years old. He didn’t let her visit us. Jamila and I went to the same high school. I used to see her every day becoming paler and more exhausted.
When I asked her about life, she always answered “Mako shi,” meaning, “Not much.” She didn’t even have a phone. She didn’t want us to worry about her.
We never knew Ibrahim was physically and emotionally abusive toward her until she called us one night after about six months. She called at 3 a.m. She asked my parents to come get her. I woke up and heard my sister crying on the speaker phone. I got up to see what had happened. I saw my mom helping my dad to get in his wheelchair to go together and bring her home.
When she arrived home, Jamila explained everything that happened. I remember my mom just sat on the ground, broken down and crying. Dad was trying to be helpful and calm Jamila down, but she was blaming him. She wanted a divorce. She told my dad she couldn’t be the family’s sacrifice anymore. My dad was terrified because that meant our staying there was a risk, which was true.
Ibrahim came the second day with two police officers trying to take her by force. Jamila was sitting there wearing the black dress (called Abaya in Iraqi) that is worn in Iraq when non-family males are present.

When he saw this, Ibrahim pulled off his belt and got ready to beat her in front of everyone, yelling in her face.
I was in the kitchen listening to all of this, and watching what my dad did. I felt really humiliated for my family being pushed around like this. I saw my dad crying a lot in front of everyone. I couldn’t just watch my sister losing her life.

I was always a quiet person and lived in my own world. I was sick of the consequences of my dad’s actions, and I always blamed him for whatever happened.
I rushed into the living room. Ibrahim was beating her with his belt and telling her that she will now be his wife without even going to school and she would cook for his family.

I rushed into him and pushed him away violently. I lost my mind. I said every cursing word that I could think of. He did nothing because he was so shocked that I did this.
I threatened him and the policemen that if they didn’t leave I would call the U.S. Army. This was the lie that saved my sister’s life. I told them, “You can’t imagine what I could do.”

In reality, I could do nothing.

From this time on, my sister got her life back.

Jamila is in college now, studying to become an engineer.
My dreams are not clear. Sometimes I have dreams about my mom driving. Then she gets hit by a car, and we find her all bloody, and I wake up and find myself crying.
So I always sleep and then wake up.
Sleep and wake up.
A scary moment was when my family and I were driving on the highway. My mom was driving from the hospital in Baghdad on our way back to our city. We were stuck in traffic due to the large number of checkpoints along our way. We left around 10 a.m., but because of security delays and stops we got home around 11 p.m. It was really dark and after curfew.
We passed some Iraqi soldiers disguised as citizens at a checkpoint. I heard really loud gunshots in the air. Someone was yelling and demanding we pull over or else he would shoot everyone in the car.

We stopped.
Another person approached us, screaming for my mom get out of the car, holding a gun in his hand, aimed at us. When he saw my mom, she explained and why we were out past curfew. He put the gun down and started asking many more questions.

“Where did you come from? Where are you going?” He asked for our IDs and drivers license.

He called his friends to search our car.

I can still remember my mom shaking and crying while talking to him.
“They are scared because insurgents attack them at night, plus no family would go out this late at night,” my dad whispered to my mom.

“We’re sorry, we are really scared at night,” the soldier said with a scarf covering his face. “A family shouldn’t be out this late. You should get home as soon as you can.”
We continued driving...
My sisters and I talked and chatted in the car, but mom and dad were very silent in shock over what happened.

After an hour, still driving in the pitch-black street, we were on a bridge, when suddenly the car shook very hard.

It felt like I died very fast.
My sister cried out, I just closed my eyes and held my breath…
A huge truck hit our car.

We almost fell off the bridge but my mom, miraculously maintained control and kept going. The truck just kept going, like nothing happened.
My mom pulled over and looked around at each one of us with a pale face. “Is anybody hurt?”

“We are okay,” I replied, and my other sisters did too. The whole driver's side of the car was crushed and dented in, the rear view mirror gone.

We still didn’t know if we’d make it home alive.
The problem is there is no stability, safety and order. The government doesn’t take care of infrastructure, including roads. In Iraq, truck drivers don’t care about small cars such as ours, and the roads are not organized. The highway is not very well lit. Only at the oil refinery is there good highway lighting.
We kept driving. My mom was very scared, and my dad was yelling; he’s always grumpy. We were alive. We just thanked God for that. She drove until we arrived safely at home. But on this night, no one slept.

I don’t know what happened. It’s like God took us, held us, and saved our lives.
In school, discrimination was a big issue. Once, when I was in the twelfth grade, I got 90% on a test. My teacher put 90% and then crossed it out and put 50%. I asked the teacher, “I got everything correct, what are my mistakes?” He said: “It’s just my mood. I’m the teacher. Don’t argue.”
I argued anyway. He yelled, “You should know the reason. You are a Shiite and you remain here? I am not going to give you your rights, whatever you do. Get out!”
This happened many times. I always got points off the test for no reason other than being Shiite.

For me, my grades matter a lot.

In Iraq, the senior final exams determine your future career. For example, if you got 90% and above, you could become a doctor, which was my dream. My final exam was changed to 69% because of bullying and corruption in the ministry of education.

I was assigned to agricultural school.
I lost everything I had worked for.
I told my dad I couldn’t stay there anymore.
He said, “Well, you will do as other people do. People stay here and get used to life.” I told him, “I am not other people. I haven’t internalized these limits. I believe I have options. I want something better.”
Whenever you leave your house in Iraq, people say, "From god we are made and to god we go back." This is because Iraqis never really know if they are going to return home again.

People in Iraq learned to normalize war, loss, and chaos. Loss happens frequently and loses its shock. The war becomes part of them.
I told my father I wasn’t going to live like this.
My father was totally against my leaving.

“How would a girl go to Syria and live alone?” he said. “You can’t even go and live on your own in Baghdad. Are you crazy?”

"Well it's true," I thought, "that’s not possible because Baghdad is full of terrorists and Al-Qaeda. Syria is different." Because there was no war, it was totally safe. People hang out in the street until three a.m.
In Iraq, passports were made through bribes. I had to pay about $400 in bribes to get the passport and a visa to Syria. This money came from Jamila’s divorce. She insisted, “You saved my life, so this money is for you.”
I decided to leave when we got the results from our final exams.

For two days, I went to the agricultural college because of the low test scores that were assigned to me.
After the first day, I searched online and learned that I could get asylum in Syria.
The second day of agricultural college, I went and bought a suitcase.
My mom told me “You’re totally crazy.” I told her, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”
My mom never ever leaves the house without my dad’s permission. But she took me to buy a suitcase to get ready for my travel.
I took the bus all the way to Syria. On the border I was happy. I saw American soldiers who were not even armed.
They looked at my eyes with some weird science fiction machine that takes your eye prints.

Kids, old men, people in poor health.

All getting their eye prints.
I officially became a refugee in Syria in December 2010.
When I arrived in Syria, I took a taxi to a certain garage where my friend told me to meet her. I went to her house for the night. The second day I looked for an apartment to rent. I got a cheap apartment that was nasty and full of mice.
When my mom said good-bye to me, I knew I would see her again. But when I left, my dad was praying the dawn prayer. I said good-bye, but he didn’t even look at me.
The moment I put my head on the pillow, I get homesick. I remember my mom. I remember how when I was ill, she used to take care of me. When I sleep, I'm always homesick.
I see my dad dead. I'm constantly anxious about this. It is part of me.
It’s true that Syria was safe, but as a woman living alone, I was always vulnerable. Many Iraqi women worked in Syria as prostitutes. So people always assumed I was a bad person.

I was often harassed on the street and had to be always very careful. Even though I was only eighteen, I learned to be very responsible and think like an adult, exploring my new life as a refugee.

I learned not to go out after dark. For example, I had to remember to buy food early in the morning. Sometimes I got stuck—I forgot to buy things and then it was late. There were still shops open, but I couldn’t go out. I occasionally slept hungry rather than go outside and risk my life.
I scheduled an interview with UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees). I told them about my whole experience and why I was seeking asylum. Eventually, I was granted legal protection by the UNHCR. With it, I was offered some food aid that I had to go receive every month. Every three months, I went to renew my visa stamp at the immigration office.
At the immigration office, people queued in very long lines, while Syrian officers sat behind glass windows with fans facing them.

The office was packed with Iraqi refugees and it was very hot inside. It smelled like rotten fish.

I was always following orders to avoid getting in trouble with Syrian officers. But people often pushed me from the line to get their turn because I was on my own and seemed very weak to them, unable to defend myself.
Prostitutes cut in line, giving officers some money to help them finish their documents quickly.

I remember one officer was nice to me. He told me I remind him of his daughter that has same name as mine. He often helped me get my papers done.

He asked me, “What are you doing here on your own? I don’t see refugees on their own, they are always in groups. Especially girls.”

I lied, “I came here with my uncle.”
I kept renewing my visa, because I had a feeling I was going to leave Syria and go somewhere. I was thinking I might go to the United States or Denmark (where my uncle lives), but I didn’t know how or when.
I felt like I was lost in God’s big land.
I found a program that helped me come to the United States and get into a U.S. college.

The program provided undergraduate education for Iraqi refugees who were displaced by war and the continuing violence in Iraq, to help them participate in rebuilding their country in the future.

The program took students who spoke really good English, were committed to their education, and were willing to return home in the future to rebuild Iraq.
I completed my college application and wrote my essays, working with American volunteers in Syria and friends who worked with the program.
I was one of the seven students who got accepted out of a pool of sixteen. The rest remained in Syria. Some waited for another year to apply again.
When I first landed in America, everything seemed beautiful and glamorous. I was happy when I saw that people look like what I’d seen in the movies. Different skin colors, outfits, hair color…blonde and brown.
Near the bed I slept in when I first arrived was a radio by my head. When I woke up, I searched through the stations listening to the radio alarm. It was all in English. I thought, “Oh my God, this is real.” I got up and I realized, “This world is all English.”

This didn’t last long. Culture shock set in.
I have changed a lot since I left Iraq. I never imagined myself living on my own in a foreign country.
Now I am living in between two cultures, which is very hard for me. On both sides, nobody is satisfied.
I told my family I’m not wearing a scarf anymore. It was very hard for them to accept “the new Alia,” without a scarf, or Hijab.
My dad often said to my mom “Your daughter left home, and now she’s not wearing the scarf. What will she do next?” He considers me Americanized, which is partially true. I’m trying to get adapted here.

But I still have my identity, values, and culture as an Iraqi. I don’t drink. I don’t go to clubs or party. Some my of my American friends would say I don’t have “a nightlife.”
Simultaneously, here I feel that I am always labeled as a “Muslim Iraqi,” especially while wearing the Hijab. It draws boundaries. “You’re Iraqi, so I’m not going to be friends with you.” Or, “You’re a Muslim.” This is why I decided not to wear it anymore. I’ve changed something that is part of me because of this culture.
Without the scarf, I see that things are so different. People are a lot nicer.
Then, too, I have some professors that see me without the scarf and say, “Oh I’m so happy for you. You are free now.”

No, this is not the case! It was my choice when I started wearing it and my choice also to stop wearing it.
I left everything behind - my memories, clothes, my room, home, friends and most importantly, my family. I sometimes get very busy with my life here and cannot Skype with my family. I start to forget even how my mom looks. I start to act weird around my friends or at school, but I don’t realize it’s because I’m homesick.
I start to feel I have no beginning or end, no family or home.
My dreams are bloody.
Sometimes I don’t want to sleep because it’s so painful to see my family dead or the horrors that happen to them. It just feels so real. Just talking about it gives me a big headache.
It wasn’t easy for me to make friends. Many of my classmates and I don’t have things in common.

“What sports did you do in high school?” students asked me. I didn’t even know how to bike.

Others mention they were on the track team, baseball, and soccer, or they did arts and music in their high school. I basically had nothing to share. I felt behind, lost and isolated.

Whenever I look at my family’s pictures on my wall, I feel I am in the wrong place, and in the wrong time.
It takes me more time when I study. Even triple the time it takes an American student. When a teacher asks a question, I’m still thinking, “What did he ask?”
Everything that comes from my dreams about the U.S. is related to school problems.

When people ask me my name in school, I still have this fear inside me to tell them, because I’m Shiite Muslim.

Sometimes it’s with a teacher. In Iraq, a teacher used to call me by my last name, in an accusatory way, because it’s a Shiite name.

So when I hear my name called, I still have this fear inside me.

It makes school like war.
My family asks me all the time if they can get asylum and come here. I feel stuck. They ask me all the rules and regulations, but these are embassy rules. I can’t change them.
Nobody would accept a big Iraqi family in the U.S.

My family would struggle a lot.

Even when it's just me, by myself, there are so many things I’ve had to learn.
They sometimes even ask me if they could go to Denmark or Sweden. Anywhere. They were thinking even of Syria, but now Syria is devastated. Today, there was an explosion at the Sabki Park where Hiba (my Iraqi friend) and I used to usually hang out.
"What if something happens?" I asked my dad during our conversation on Skype. "Each of you needs a passport so that if something happened, you can escape."

Passports are so hard to get, because he has to pay so much for bribes. But I kept bugging him about it. My dad finally just got one – now he, my mom and all of my sisters have passports.
In my dreams, I am always in both places at the same time. Sometimes I see myself walking the dog, Max, in Iraq. And I wonder, "Why am I here in Iraq?" And it gets mixed up with shooting and soldiers.
And I wake.
There are things I would like people to understand.

I left my home when I was eighteen years old.

I would like people to understand the questions they ask.

Many people ask "Why you are here? What do you want to live here?" Sometimes they suggest we are here just because we think America is good, they think we are opportunists.

But we are here fleeing Iraq, trying to find peace and a safe shelter. I want Americans to understand this.
Some people don’t care about war, or even seem to know what it is. But being neutral to war is like saying “Yes.”

Attacking innocent people is terrorism.

Therefore, the war is terrorism.

Would you accept it for yourself, your country, and your children?

I do not believe so.

Then how do you accept it for other people to live through murder and loss?
It is true, Saddam was a dictator. He killed, tortured, executed and orphaned millions of Iraqis. I’m one of the people who lost many family member during his regime.

But even so, the majority of people were able to carry on with their daily lives. Now we cannot. Now the whole country is devastated. Attacking another country causes chaos in that country, at the very least.

If I were to say the war is wrong, people might say that probably it's because I was not affected by Saddam.

We had a surface level of safety under Saddam. But we lived, and we didn’t have this massive number of people dying. My family had many people arrested by Saddam’s forces. My family was made of educated, influential people, and some were of Persian origins.
When I came to Minnesota, my past life became like a dream. I have a dead life there. But when I have to listen to the news, I feel how distant I am. It’s painful to follow up with the news and the updates in Iraq now.
We had many accidents in Iraq. Sometimes I think I'm lucky just to have survived myself. But it's still all so real.
You don't react to the intense atmosphere of war in daily life; it just arrives in dreams.
Before war, I knew happiness.

I found happiness on my way back home, from the smile that took its path on the old man’s face sitting on his chair by the house contemplating a beautiful sunny day.

I found happiness from my mom when I came back from school. I saw her at a distance watering the plants and washing the front yard. With a beautiful smile on her face, she asked me if I was hungry. As always, she had already made some delicious lunch for me.
The dinner table was our family gathering time, each one of us shared how their day went and told funny jokes, which my grouchy dad didn’t like because “It’s dinner time”.
We used to go on picnics with our neighbors and go to the lake, Al-Habbaniya, or Mosul Dam. We used to barbeque, have tea over a fire, dance, play tennis and sometimes play a chasing game until everyone became exhausted.
We grilled Kebab and other delicious food. We brought along games to the picnics, like chess and backgammon, and we swam and played tennis and soccer.
We used to go to the mountains also on trips and take photos of the landscapes.
Then there is Iraq after the war.

No more “Girls Hang-out,” unless you want to be kidnapped or raped. No more barbeque and picnics with friends, no more serenity, because everyone is divided according to their ethnicity, religion and gender. No more “fresh scent of life.” Now, Baghdad smells like grilled meat because of the explosions and burned people.

Iraq is dead now … and needs a miracle to come back.
I hope readers won't think I dislike the American people. It is the opposite.

I have great respect for the American people. Even when I was a young girl in Iraq, when nobody approached the U.S. soldiers, I use to go up to them and say hi and chat with them.

I made many friends among the soldiers, and I am still in touch with many of them.

I see them suffering now, too.

I asked them to show me family pictures, photos of their kids, or to write for me their name. One gave me a book when I had an English test, "Deception Point" by Dan Brown.
K-2
at gate ask for "CIMIL"

A I go to University
in Massachusetts. It is
near New York. My job
in the Army is "Civil Affairs"
We use interpreters and
try to do good in Iraq
communities.

You speak English very well.
Keep Studying!
LV Init - O
LV Paid - 0 4/11/13
USE/LOSE, 25 %
To All,

We put this together for you and your family. You are a good friend. Keep studying. And we hope all of your dreams come true. We have to leave soon. New soldiers will be replacing us soon. Write us and we will write back. We won't forget you.
take care.

Your friends
Once I was in the United States, I went to visit the family of one of the soldier’s who was my friend in Iraq.
They bought my plane ticket and wanted to meet me.
Everything that happened in the past becomes events. Simply. You must try to isolate them and to forget them in order to avoid becoming paranoid.

My dreams hurt a lot. Somtimes I wish I could lose my memory.
All of these realities leave something dark inside me. I can't avoid it.
In Iraq, I felt safe when I was with my family only, because if we died, we all would die together.

At any moment I could get raped, beheaded, kidnapped, anything could happen. This is what Al-Qaeda did many times to people.

It became normal to hear about some friend or family relative who left work or school and nobody saw them after that, because they were kidnapped.

When a person is kidnapped, everybody knew their life has ended. So we pray for God to have mercy on them.
It’s mostly unrealistic when people suggest, “Go to school in the U.S. for four years and then return to Iraq to rebuild your country.”

Rebuild what?

I’m going to rebuild Iraq on my own? For sure, I want to go back. We want to do this so badly. But everything has to be in time, with the right circumstances.

Who can guarantee that I would be safe if I went back?
Before bed sometimes I listen to the Quran. It helps me calm down.

I call Hibba in Nebraska. We go on Skype together with our moms. And we tell them we're fine.
We never tell our family bad news. If I told my mom this she would say, "Why are you homesick? Do you miss it here? You forget what it's like."
In Iraq, people make good out of bad.

If the electricity goes off in their house, they don’t just sit and get bored. They go out and talk to neighbors next door and to friends. It makes people less dependent on technology because it allows people to communicate, to get to know each other and enjoy each other’s company.
When my dad goes out in the street, kids always run and fight over who can push his wheelchair. The kids play soccer in the street and the kids stop their game when he comes out, arguing about who can push his wheelchair.
Iraq has very beautiful culture and traditions.

If you are a stranger coming into a room or a class, you have to greet everyone and say, “Peace be upon you.” Men shake hands, women hug and kiss on the cheeks.
I’m one of the luckiest of millions of Iraqis.

Life gave me a chance, and I'm trying to give something back.
Being half asleep is the best state to be in, because I don't have the dreams.
It's very hard to be peaceful inside.

Only when I'm with people, I can feel that peace.
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This book is the result of the author’s courage and focus at the Veterans Book Workshop, where we work to make manageable and material personal archives of images, words and memories from the current wars.

This book is one of many made in the Veterans Book Workshop. Each emerged from different circumstances and each finds its own unique use. One veteran may reference this book regularly, while another may set it aside in order to move on.

Regardless of the ways they are used, no dust settles on these archives. This book contains a powerful living collection of data, memory, and experience that is so relevant it trembles. You must pay very close attention to hear its call.

We made this book for listening. Please accept our invitation. We made this book for deployment. Please pass it along and invite someone else to listen.

Thank you,
Monica Haller

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Alia likes to draw, has one dog and lives with an American family. She plays pool and chess because she loves to be challenged and to challenge people. Alia enjoys photography and filming. This is the first book she has ever written.