

“Refugee Stories” Lincoln North Star High School Discussion transcript

(Jabbar Kaied/Refugee from Iraq) My name is Jabbar Kaied. I’m from Iraq.

(Mike Tobias/Reporting) Jabbar grew up in the coastal city of Basra, where he gained fame as a musician, composer, and professional soccer player. In the mid-1990s, Jabbar was involved in a failed uprising against Saddam Hussein.

(Kaied) We occupied 14 cities and then Saddam, he’s controlled that, that’s uprising again and he controlled the country, curbed the people, and killed so many Iraqis. Then he killed many of my friends. They are missing so far. Even my brother, he’s oil engineer.

(Tobias) Jabbar was forced to flee first to Baghdad, then to U.S. enforced safety zones in northern Iraq where he joined an opposition party and worked as a translator. Hussain’s forces attacked. Jabbar got away, living in caves with little to eat until U.S. forces evacuated him to Turkey. He’s been in Lincoln since 2000 working for the State Department of Labor.

(Emir Ibrahimasic/Refugee from Bosnia) My name is Emir Ibrahimasic. I’m from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

(Tobias) Emir had a pretty good life as high school student in the town of Modrica, until war broke out in 1992. His family fled Modrica when Serb forces attacked, later looting their house. Most of his 30 high school classmates stayed behind to fight.

(Ibrahimasic) I know that five of us are only alive. The majority of them were killed during the war.

(Tobias) His family first evacuated to the city of Tuzla, then later the neighboring country of Croatia.

(Ibrahimasic) I completed my high school over there and then after the political climate in Croatia turned rather sour for Bosnia refugees, I had to leave Croatia too. I first went to Turkey, spent four months there, but then in early 1994, I arrived at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minn., where I completed my undergraduate education.

(Tobias) Emir is now working on a Ph.D. in economics at UNL and working in the International Affairs office.

(Samira Mahboub/Refugee from Afghanistan) Hi everyone. My name is Samira. My last name is Mahboub, and I have come from Afghanistan.

(Tobias) Samira was born in the mountains of northern Afghanistan, but spent much of her life in the capitol city of Kabul. Her teenage years were difficult. War broke out and her father was shot in the leg. Men broke into her house and they beat her and her father. The family fled to the northern city of Mazar-I-Sharif. There, Samira started a group to help educate children and women banned from school by the Taliban. In 1999, she snuck across the border to Pakistan so she could covertly travel to a conference in Hawaii as national leader of the education group. She would never return to Afghanistan.

(Mahboub) After two days when we got to Hawaii, I got a phone call that I can't go back because they want to kill me obviously they want to do that. But then I was really concerned about my parents because they were still living there and when I couldn't go back and I didn't go back, they put my father in prison instead of me. And they were trying to get me back that way, but my parents told me it's better for me to stay here than being hanged in front of them.

(Tobias) Samira now lives with relatives and is studying international business at UNL.

(North Star Student) I was just wondering what it was like escaping from your countries the day that you left.

(Ibrahimasic) I still remember like it was yesterday. It was June 23, 1992. It was beautiful summer day and it started out with heavy shelling. Serbs started bombarding the city. It wasn't pleasant experience. There were about 200 refugees in a 50-people bus, people puking, I mean scared. The Serbian airplanes dropping bombs on civilians. We were shot at a few times, but they missed us fortunately and then at the Croatian borders, a Croatian border crossing, Croatian police wouldn't let us through because they had already too many Bosnian refugees so you can't go back, you know you will be killed and you know if they let you through, that's some sort of relative safety. I guess after awhile they gave up. They give in, I mean, the Croatian border guards and they let us in. They just couldn't stand watching civilians there and that's basically escape experience.

(North Star Student) Was there ever a time in your life when you were going through a hard situation that you just wanted to give up?

(Ibrahimasic) Actually, it happened quite a few times when the war broke out, I was 16 years old and you know, I'd been shot at. We'd been running away as refugees. Airplanes dropping bombs on us and you survive all

that, but then I don't know, you were refugee. You have nothing. You don't have country. You don't have home. You don't have any documents. You cannot travel anywhere. You cannot work. You go to school. You're being discriminated against. So often you come to the point, you know, where you sometimes as you said, you just wish to give up.

(Mahboub) Well as Emir said, it happens to everybody I think, but in our situation, I think since we were moving from one city to another and we didn't know where we gonna end up. And rockets and bullets were around us all the time. You never knew in Afghanistan, it was really hard for me to adjust when I got here and I heard people were planning for next year vacation. Because back home since the rockets and bullets were around all the time, you even couldn't say that you're gonna be to somebody's house after an hour. Because you never knew if you're gonna be alive after an hour. Or even a minute. So it was really hard for me to adjust with that and like a life like that, you can imagine that how many times you wanted to give up, but it has happened to me a lot. Even like a few months ago. Because I haven't seen my parents for four years now. And I thought it's enough. But there is one thing that I have learned from my dad, that whenever you face a problem, just remember the people who are worse than you. Not the people who are in a better shape than you. And it makes you face that problem and try to get out of it.

(Tobias) Each of your countries has had some sort of international action, some sort of international peacekeeping efforts. Sometimes it's been successful. Sometimes it's been a failure. Maybe each of you can talk a little bit about that, how you feel about that, what's worked and what's hasn't.

(Kaied) I think the international society or United Nation whatever, they try to go to do something in Iraq, but they cannot, until the situation is get worse to worst and he is fight with Iran for eight years, killed many people, and then he's invaded Kuwait. That's actually the situation controlling by Saddam regime and nobody can give hands from outside because they slam the door.

(Ibrahimasic) International community at least in Bosnian case acted rather hastily and sort of too late. A lot of things happened. Concentration camps were open. People were executed. The rape camps were made for women. Terrible things. Just hard to describe. And all that was happening, people could watch it on TV and nobody really did anything about it. And eventually when something was done, many people felt that not enough was done. The same political parties that actually started the war are still in power in Bosnia.

(Mahboub) When I was back home, I was working actually with three different offices of United Nations. They do work in those countries, but not the way they should have. Because I think life never comes back and we have lost kind of a lifetime in 28 years. For me which I'm 25-years-old and since war was in our country for 28 years, I haven't seen peace in our country. And I think they can do better than what they did and they could have done it. They could have stopped war. They could have interfered when Taliban started it. I think they should have done something better than what they are doing, but still they are hoping in Afghanistan a lot.

(North Star Student) I was just wondering how you guys feel about the U.S. foreign policy in your country.

(Kaied) We support the United States and policies of the United State is, I mean, for us, not for other issues, I cannot answer other issues because I'm just talking about myself. How I am happy with that, with that help. Because United States save my life.

(Ibrahimasic) There would be no peace in Bosnia if it were not for the United States intervention that was humanitarian intervention and without political pressure from Washington, D.C., seriously, the warring factions in Bosnia would never agree to lay down their weapons. And how I feel about it? I feel great. There's some people that will argue that peace is not fair. It's still peace.

(Mahboub) The only thing makes me a little bit upset is that United States was just this close to accepting Taliban as government in Afghanistan. And what happened on Sept. 11 caused United State to think about Afghanistan twice. And it's kind of like a lot more price to pay for something like that. They could have done it before and we may haven't seen the towers collapsing, but it's probably something that God wants. Who knows?

(North Star Student) Do you guys plan to go back there anytime soon?

(Ibrahimasic) Honestly, I do. But not anytime soon. It's I think hard and at this point, I don't think I would be probably mentally fit enough to accept, if you want to call the rules of the game over there right now.

(Kaied) To me, to answer your question is no. Yeah. Because you know, much different life between there and here. Saddam dictatorship, he's ruling the country. It's more than three decades as I told you and he destroy everything in my country. There is no life there until the United States in April 2003, they make liberation. And situation now is, you know, come from below zero. But I like the system in the United States.

(Mahboub) Obviously, it's our country and we have to go there and we should go there because we are the people here to learn and to earn a lot and learn a lot and go back and fix things that are not really the way they should be. And since the country has been in war for 28 years, there is nothing left there and there are so many people that are living in different countries around the world and I think the country needs us. But not anytime soon because there is no functional government there. And then you're not sure if you go there, you're gonna be alive after a minute, so for sure we need to go there and try to help our country and our people there.

(North Star Teacher) What lesson is it that you want to teach these kids that they can learn and that they can carry on and teach others?

(Ibrahimasic) One thing I learn and I always tell people, try to value peace and freedom. That's really something that no money can really really buy. The three of us, we've been through different experiences, but again, similar in a way we've been through, we had some really traumatic periods in our lives and I would always be much much happier if that war in my country never happened, and we continue to live freely and so on, so it's something very very valuable that you have here and that you need to respect it and teach other people of that.

(Kaied) But you should be optimistic. That's my wisdom in the life. I learn about it from my father to be optimistic with everything. There is many things between you and I mean many barriers between you and your dreams. There is many dreams, but I think guys, you have very nice opportunities here. You have good life here. A luxury life you have. Better than the others. You have to learn from us. You have to learn from other people, from other countries. We have everything, but we don't have freedom. So you have freedoms and that's as my friend Emir, he said, you cannot get it by money. You cannot buy it.