

Helping Displaced Families And Others Most in Need

A Ground Truth Interview with Khaldoon Ali

Before returning to Iraq last fall, Khaldoon Ali, director of the Iraqi NGO Mercy Hands, met with EPIC at a hotel near Reagan National Airport outside of Washington, D.C. For an hour, Khaldoon shared stories about his life as an Iraqi doctor and his passion for helping the thousands of Iraqis forced to flee their homes to safer parts of the country. In the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, Khaldoon co-founded Mercy Hands to assist Iraqis in need, regardless of their ethnic, political, religious or sectarian affiliations. With the help of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Khaldoon has reached thousands of Iraq's most marginalized populations, offering a second chance at life to those struggling to survive in the new Iraq.

epic: Tell us about yourself and what it was like living in Iraq before 2003.

Khaldoon: I grew up in Baghdad in a hard-working middle class family of eight. After I graduated from Baghdad College Secondary School, I entered medical school in Baghdad in 1994, convinced that life would become easier once I got my degree. But when I started working my first job at Al Kadhimiya General Teaching Hospital, which is located in Al Kadhimiya city, north of Baghdad near the Northern Gate, my salary was so low that I couldn't even cover my daily expenses.

I explored the option of leaving the country through legal channels, but under Saddam Hussein, physicians and engineers were considered "high intellectuals" and were forbidden from having passports. Unless I wanted to leave illegally and risk execution, I was stuck.

After two years of residency, my time had come to join the army, a mandatory requirement under the regime. This was in October 2002, when it started becoming clear that war with the U.S. was imminent. Because I did not want to fight for the regime, I extended my residency for another three months, knowing that in January I would have no choice but to join the military.

epic: What happened when your extension ended? Were

you forced to enlist in Saddam's military?

Khaldoon: Well, as the American forces got closer to Baghdad, I became less and less afraid of being punished by Iraqi intelligence forces for avoiding military service. Instead, I joined fifteen of my colleagues and volunteered at the hospital where I had completed my residency. Though once a fully-functioning facility that employed three hundred physicians, the hospital was in shambles when I came on board. The only functioning department was the emergency room, and our staff of sixteen worked in rotations until we thought we would pass out.

There was a continuous gush of patients, which we were inadequately prepared to deal with. Tragically, many died on our tables due to a lack of proper medication and functioning equipment. What's more, because of the extreme level of violence, our ambulance team found it difficult to respond to emergencies. Eventually we were forced to discontinue the ambulance service and waited inside the hospital for anyone who was lucky enough to reach us.

epic: Did you continue to volunteer at the hospital after the regime fell?

Khaldoon: After Saddam was out of power, I began working as a field monitor for Première Urgence, a French NGO working in Iraq. I spent one year in Baghdad monitoring Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), watching their move-



Khaldoon Ali, a doctor by training, established the Iraqi NGO Mercy Hands following the 2003 invasion. Created at a time when many international organizations were pulling out of Iraq, Khaldoun joined a group of committed humanitarian workers to reach out to Iraq's most vulnerable people, including Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), children, the homeless and the urban poor. Khaldoun currently works with Mercy Hands' staff of 100 dedicated employees and splits time between its Baghdad and Amman, Jordan offices.

ments and tending to their needs. However, I soon became frustrated when I found out that, due to security concerns, this NGO was reluctant to help the Roma [or *Gypsies*] of Iraq, a highly marginalized group in my country.

Sadly, the Roma's story is largely untold. Prior to Saddam, the Roma people were treated badly and denied citizenship rights in Iraq. However, when Iraq entered war with Iran, Saddam needed to increase the size of Iraq's army, so he granted special benefits to the Roma community, including second-degree citizenship and permanent residence. The Roma, like other groups privileged under Saddam, were despised among Shia and Sunni communities. When Saddam's regime fell, the Roma people became targets of violence and the new Iraqi government stripped them of their privileges. Today, the Roma are often forced to sell alcohol and prostitute themselves in order to survive.

After I realized that no one was helping the Roma, I pleaded with many international humanitarian organizations to help. Unfortunately, this was in 2004, when many international NGOs started to leave Iraq. Eventually *Première Urgence*, the NGO I worked for, decided to reduce its mission, as well, but they encouraged me to establish a local NGO of my own. I was reluctant to do so because of the bad reputation Iraqi NGOs had earned.

epic: Why do Iraqi NGOs have a bad reputation?

Khaldoon: They haven't always. In the early 1900s Islamic leaders developed a way to gather and distribute money to poor people, resulting in the establishment of many basic faith-based organizations. After the British army invaded Iraq and established a constitutional monarchy in 1921, Iraq's rudimentary civil society network was institutionalized and the new democratic environment paved the way for establishing highly-organized and effective non-governmental organizations.

When Saddam Hussein's regime took over in 1968 Iraqi civil society was essentially killed. The Baath party dismantled most civil society groups, and the few organizations the regime decided to keep—for example, the General Federation of Iraqi Youth, the General Federation of Iraqi Students, and the General Federation of Iraqi Women—became mouthpieces for Baath party rhetoric. From 1968-2003, most Iraqis, including me, really didn't know about civil society; we didn't even know what the acronym "NGO" meant. After several generations without true NGOs, many people simply forgot

about civil society.

After Saddam's regime fell, the concept of civil society was reintroduced to Iraq, and since then thousands of NGOs have been established. Unfortunately, some of the early NGOs made a bad first impression. Instead of distributing aid money provided by international organizations, many NGO employees bought cars and other things for themselves.

Today, though improvements are always needed, there are better systems in place to ensure that Iraqi organizations are using their money appropriately. To date, approximately 4,000 Iraqi NGOs have registered with Iraq's Ministry of Civil

Society Affairs, but there are still many that haven't registered. Because of this, some put the total number Iraqi NGOs at upwards of 6,000. Either way, Iraqi civil society is growing rapidly, and popular understanding of civil society is growing with it. It is within this new environment that Mercy Hands was created to work with the most vulnerable populations in Iraq and contribute to Iraqi civil society.

epic: Tell us about the work of Mercy Hands and why it was created.

Khaldoon: After three major wars and more than 13 years of sanctions, many of Iraq's people are vulnerable and in need of support during this post conflict transitional period—that is where Mercy Hands comes in. We are an Iraq-based NGO, formed in the aftermath of the 2003 war by a group of committed humanitarian workers. Mercy Hands is a non-religious and non-political organization that acts to assist people in need regardless of their ethnic, political, religious or sectarian backgrounds. We are especially committed to assisting the most vulnerable and often ignored groups, including the Roma, IDPs, children, the homeless and the urban poor. We operate nationwide and are the local partner of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Our headquarters are located in Baghdad, and we have a satellite office in Amman, Jordan in order to closely coordinate and communicate with the international humanitarian community that has relocated from Iraq to Amman. We have a total staff of about 100.

Mercy Hands carries out its mission through a mix of time-sensitive and ongoing programs that are run out of four major departments: Monitoring, Emergency Humanitarian Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, and Civil Society.

Our Monitoring department creates a clearer picture of the numbers and needs of the IDP community by regularly

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monitoring the general situation relating to health, social, and protection issues. For example, Mercy Hands reports on the situation of the IDP community living in public building camps, collective towns, and open lands. Since March 2005, we have been an implementing partner of the UNHCR. We conduct different monitoring and assistance activities to help refugees, returnees and IDPs in the governorates of Baghdad, Diyala, Babylon, Najaf, and Anbar.

The Emergency Humanitarian Relief department was started in November 2004 to accurately and rapidly assess IDP crises throughout Iraq in urgent need of humanitarian aid, regardless of the reasons for displacement. To date, Mercy Hands' Emergency Program, funded by IOM, has assisted thousands of displaced persons throughout Iraq. Mercy Hands has the capacity to manage the procurement, warehousing and distribution of food and non-food items to respond immediately to identified needs.

Our Rehabilitation and Reconstruction department is our newest. It was developed in August 2005 with the assistance of a team of engineers and out of a desire to be involved in community-based development. We hope to improve the living standards of vulnerable populations and communities and assist in finding long-term solutions that address everyday needs. Recently we have been doing Quick Impact Projects that target smaller communities. For example, when we found out that a community of displaced Marsh Arabs were not being provided with basic public services, we established mobile hygienic latrines for them.

Finally, there is our Civil Society department, which runs capacity-building and conflict resolution programs. In July 2006, we started working with an IDP community located in an ex-military camp called Al-Rashid in southeast Baghdad. Within this community was a small group of Iraqis that wanted to offer assistance to the rest of their community, but were unsure how to go about it. We began to teach them the principles of civil society and humanitarian work, and we helped them become organized. We then rehabilitated a building and provided them with simple furniture and a couple of computers so they could have a decent base from which to operate.

epic: Where is the most displacement happening in Iraq?

Khaldoon: Though people have been forced to flee for many different reasons, much of the displacement in Iraq occurs wherever there are mixed communities, particularly in Baghdad, because these are the areas most prone to violence. "Post-Samara IDPs" is the latest category and most of the

humanitarian aid is going to this group. The term, of course, refers to the period after the bombing of the Golden Mosque of Samara on February 22, 2006. The high-intensity sectarian violence that followed and continues to this day is the direct cause of much of the displacement that has occurred in all sects.

epic: What has the government been doing lately to help IDPs?

Khaldoon: In the aftermath of the 2003 conflict, the government established the Ministry of Displacement & Migration (MoDM) to provide urgent assistance to Iraqi IDPs. UNHCR and IOM have been building the capacity of this ministry, but there are still many obstacles.

We do much to assist this ministry; however as there is no legislation to define the relationship between Iraq's government and the NGO community we cannot do as much as we'd like.

epic: Does Mercy Hands offer help with obtaining legal status for IDPs and other vulnerable communities in Iraq?

Khaldoon: The legal status of IDPs, stateless individuals and refugees is still unclear in Iraq, as this was not even an issue prior to the fall of Saddam. To assist these groups in their legal battles, Mercy Hands developed a separate Legal Aid and Information Center (LAIC) in August of 2005. This center helps identify protection concerns that returnees have and provides those who need it with free legal advice and representation.

Mercy Hands' LAIC has three teams, each composed of a lawyer and an information officer. Each team carries out information campaigns to promote awareness of their rights and to help guide them through the legal procedures and to relevant authorities and services. We help people obtain official and personal documents such as nationality, civil IDs, birth and death certificates or marriage and divorce certificates.

epic: What success has Mercy Hands seen in the past year?

Khaldoon: We have been part of many success stories. I will just give you a few examples. Starting in June 2005, Mercy Hands helped relocate Al Tash Iranian Kurdish refugees—492 families in all—from the Al Tash camp in Anbar governorate to northern Iraq. We held meetings with committees responsible for running the Al Tash camp and distributed leaflets to inform the refugees about the assistance that would be provided during the relocation. We helped them fill out

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a Voluntary Relocation Form and sent the data to the UNHCR. Once they relocated, we followed up to see that their needs were being met.

One of our greatest successes was our implementation of the IOM's Winterization Project, a huge undertaking that proved very successful. From November to December 2004, we distributed supplies to 11,340 IDP families in Central Iraq (Salah Al-Din, Baghdad, Anbar and Diyala governorates) to mitigate the adverse effects of the cold, wet winter weather. From January to February 2006, we helped 370 IDP families in Baghdad and 714 in Babil governorate. When heavy rainfall struck Salah Al-Deen and Diyala governorates in February 2006, we distributed non-food items (NFIs) and food items (FIs) to 1405 families affected by the floods. After the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samara that same month, we distributed both FIs and NFIs to 470 newly displaced families located in the Baghdad governorates. We did the same thing in April 2006 for families displaced due to sectarian violence in Babil and Karbala governorates. On November 2, 2006, we successfully distributed NFIs to 346 IDP families in Baghdad governorate, who were displaced from Sabaa Al-Boor due to sectarian violence.

epic: How has the security situation in Iraq affected Mercy Hands' programs?

Khaldoon: Iraq's poor security conditions have made monitoring the humanitarian situation extremely difficult and risky for the international community. Because of this, international organizations like the IOM and UNHCR rely on national NGOs, like Mercy Hands, to monitor the situation on the ground. We have better access and are more readily accepted by local communities than international organizations.

epic: How is Mercy Hands funded? Have you had problems securing the funds you need to continue your important work?

Khaldoon: Our main donors are IOM and UNHCR, but their funds are limited. Right now, however, the plight of Iraq's vulnerable populations, particularly IDPs, is becoming increasingly important to the international community as the problem approaches crisis levels. The international community has started to realize the importance of Mercy Hands and the work of similar Iraqi NGOs, and UNHCR's budget for 2007 includes increased funding for such programs.

epic: Have you received funding directly from the United States?

Khaldoon: We haven't. As a demonstration of our neutrality, we are not willing to accept funding from parties involved in the conflict. It is also a matter of principle. In my experience, the U.S. has not been completely honest about its spending in Iraq.

I will give you a personal example. Not long ago, I was approached by an acquaintance who works with the U.S. to appropriate funds to Iraqi NGOs, and he offered to give me money. He said that his job is to give money to Iraqi NGOs and report back to Washington that it was spent to support democracy in Iraq's "hot areas," like Baghdad and Anbar province. He asserted to me that some NGOs were taking millions of U.S. dollars and simply sending fake "progress" reports back to the U.S.! When he reported these incidents of fraud, his supervisor said that as long as the money was being spent, he didn't care. I was outraged.

Rather than receive direct assistance from the U.S., Mercy Hands only takes funds from multilateral agencies, like the UN, and some international NGOs. Though funding is sometimes scarce and difficult to come by, it is a more honest means, and it is a way to ensure that my organization does not fall into a trap that could hurt us more than help us in the end.

THE EPIC GROUND TRUTH INTERVIEWS is a unique series of interviews with Iraqis, aid workers, returning soldiers, and others who have lived, worked or served in Iraq. By offering perspectives about Iraq that can only be gained from being there, EPIC hopes these interviews will inspire meaningful policy change and citizen action in support of a better future for all Iraqis. To learn more about The Ground Truth, contact EPIC project coordinator Daphne Watkins at dwatkins@epic-usa.org. To subscribe, visit <http://www.epic-usa.org>

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