



Taha's facial bullet wounds and sightless left eye are his personal legacies of the war in his native Iraq. Taha, a translator, used his connections to warn the soldiers of attacks until he and his family were forced to flee with the help of his U.S. commander. They now live in Tucson, but making ends meet is difficult.

Dean Knuth / Arizona Daily Star

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"I have no doubt that he saved lives. We took all of his advice... and avoided conflict all but once during our missions in 11 months." Army Capt. David Salazar, speaking of Taha (right), an interpreter in the Iraq war

EDITOR'S NOTE

At his request, the Star is not using the last name of Taha, a former interpreter for the U.S. forces in the Iraq war, and his wife and son, who are now trying to make a new life in Tucson. Taha says he is afraid that in the Internet age, anti-U.S. insurgents may see this story and that if they knew his family name; they would target and harm his relatives remaining in Iraq.

A debt beyond money

What do we owe this Iraqi friend to GIs? How high can Tucsonans count?

By Patty Machelor
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Sgt. Joseph Cardone left immediately after seeing the address. "As soon as I got the e-mail, I told my wife and kids, 'Let's go,' " said Cardone, who works in military intelligence at Fort Huachuca.

They buckled their three children into the car and drove about 75 miles, from Sierra Vista to Tucson.

"My wife said, 'How do you even know if he's home?' "Cardone, 27, said."I said, 'I don't, but it doesn't matter.' "

At a Midtown complex on that August midafternoon, Cardone found the apartment and an Iraqi man he credits with saving the lives of many U.S. soldiers, including his own.

"There were big smiles, big hugs" upon seeing Taha again, Cardone said. "I introduced my family to his family, and he introduced his family to my family. It was amazing."

Ambush in Al Kut

Less than two years earlier, on a winter night in Al Kut, Iraq, Taha had stopped his car to let a pedestrian cross.

The first bullet shattered the car window and entered Taha's head just below his left temple.

The next also started there, but traveled out lower than the first, this time under his chin instead of along his right jaw.

Both shots severed nerves, leaving part of his face numb and his left eye blind.

Then he was shot again, in his chest and arm. Four times. One bullet remains where it settled along his right side, pressing painfully on a nerve.

Taha didn't realize his wife, Sura, had also been shot.

He didn't see her wrap a blanket tightly around their infant son or watch her throw him, away from the gunfire and into the rain and mud, where he screamed.

A lucky couple

Taha and Sura had considered themselves a fortunate couple, lucky just to find each other and to marry.

They were born in Al Kut, a city of 750,000 people southeast of Baghdad and about 40 miles from the Iranian border.

The older generations of their families knew one another well, but since they are from different tribes — Sura is Al Lami and Taha is Wese — marriage between their children and grandchildren was unlikely.

To Sura's father, it was out of the question.

Taha and Sura were newly trained English teachers when they became friends in 1998. The attraction grew strong quickly, but her family didn't approve.

Taha was a kick boxer who looked angry all the time, her parents said.

"My uncle said, 'He was cute when he was a kid, but now he's trouble,' " Sura said, laughing at the memory.

Taha wouldn't give up. For five years, he repeatedly proposed. For five years, they met in secret and became more determined to marry.

In 2003, Taha began helping train Iraqi police for the U.S. military.

A sheik of Sura's tribe needed some help with translation, and Taha came to his aid. The sheik then asked if he could return the favor.

Sura's father listened to the sheik speak of Taha and his integrity, and he finally agreed. That was on Dec. 13, 2003.

The next day, Taha heard celebratory gunfire in the streets. He wondered, briefly, if family and friends were shooting in honor of his long-awaited marriage, but quickly realized the guns and shouting were for something else.

Saddam Hussein had been captured.

Clan under a cloud

Years earlier, in the 1980s, one of Taha's cousins was executed by Saddam's army.

"He refused to fight the Iranians without a good reason," said Taha, who was a young boy at the time. "After my cousin was executed, my whole family was under a question mark."

Taha's parents and nine siblings kept to themselves as much as possible. One of his brothers felt endangered and eventually fled to Jordan. He now lives in Germany.

In general, though, life under Saddam's dictatorship was relatively normal for Taha. Low wages were the biggest problem he encountered.

Taha taught English at a teachers college and earned less than \$3 per month. There was no room for advancement and so, to help his family, he also worked at night selling kabobs.

"As a poor man, I didn't have a chance," he said. They could afford to eat only tomatoes, bread and eggplant each day, he said.

Sura, who had not yet married Taha, was also working as a teacher. At night, she helped her sister with sewing.

"Your life was so busy," she said. "It's so hard to have to work all the day and night."

The war comes to Al Kut

Armored vehicles and foreign soldiers arrived in Al Kut in April 2003.

People were afraid, Taha said. They'd been told the U.S. soldiers would rape the women and destroy homes and farms.

Taha walked to the soldiers' base, about seven minutes from his home, and asked to speak to someone in charge.

After being searched, Taha was allowed in. He asked a high-ranking officer when the troops were going to leave.

"He asked me about chemical weapons. I told him, 'I don't know anything about chemical weapons. I'm a teacher,' "Taha said.

"He said, 'You want to work for me?' "

Taha was still earning just a few dollars a month. He sought his father's advice.

"He told me to go work for them. He said, 'If you want to help your family and your country, to rebuild it, God will help you,' " Taha said.

"The next day, I was at the gate at 9 a.m. sharp."

"Like a heaven" under the GIs

Life changed dramatically in Al Kut after the arrival of the U.S. troops.

"Believe me, it was like a heaven," Taha said. "They were building schools, paving roads, putting in water stations."

Teachers started earning more, up to \$100 per month.

As a translator, Taha was doing even better than that. His first paycheck for a month's work was \$312. He was able to buy a car. Soon he had some savings.

"They convinced me they are good guys," he said of the soldiers. "They had a great mission there."

Taha helped train the Iraqi police and set up the new Iraqi Civilian Defense Corps.

At first, he didn't have to wear armor or a helmet. But that didn't last. Within a year, violence increased dramatically.

"The Iranians were supporting the militia, and we were trying to secure the border and train the Iraqi border guards," he said. "It became worse and worse."

"Is this real? Is this real?"

It was about 8:20 p.m. on Jan. 5, 2007, Sura remembers. They were returning from her in-laws' home.

"My baby was sitting on my lap, breastfeeding," she said.

Driving was slow because of the rain. There was a lot of mud.

As they approached their house, Sura noticed a man standing close to the roadway. It appeared to Sura that he was hunching over to stay warm.

"I told (Taha), 'Someone wants to cross the street. Be careful,' " Sura said.

They stopped and the man started to cross, but then backtracked.

Seconds later, the glass window next to her husband's head shattered.

"At the time I was saying, 'Is this real? Is this real?' It was just like a nightmare," Sura said.

Terrified, she realized she needed to protect their son, and so she leaned forward, twisting her body around him. She didn't feel the bullets going into her leg as she wrapped her son in a blanket and pushed him out of their car.

After the shooting stopped, Sura stepped out into the rain and fell down, next to her crying baby. She tried to stand again, and fell again. This time she realized that the bone and muscle in her upper leg had been shattered and torn by seven bullets.

Her son, she later learned, was unharmed except for a scrape where a bullet had grazed the top of his head. A bald patch is still there.

Hospital helps little

They were taken first to an Iraqi hospital. Taha said there were no blood transfusions. No pain medication was offered. Taha received a blanket only after asking for it.

Sura remembers hospital staff touching her leg wounds with unprotected hands. They told her they were going to amputate her leg. She remembers thinking of her years as a runner.

Taha received a tracheotomy, but it was performed poorly. He bled more. "The doctors were trying to finish the job," he said.

Soon, though, family members and soldiers from the team Taha had been helping showed up. The U.S. officers said they would care for Taha themselves.

Taha remembers looking up and seeing that some of the soldiers were crying.

"I joked with them. I said, 'I think I'll need a day off,' "he said." "We were laughing and crying at the same time."

He remembers the rain hitting his face as the soldiers moved him from the Iraqi hospital to an ambulance. He remembers hearing them argue with hospital staff about whether they could keep the blanket for his transport.

Taha was slipping. He believed he would die. He asked about his wife and son. "They kept saying, 'Stay with us, stay with us. Don't die,' "he said.

Taha credited with saving lives

The last team of U.S. soldiers Taha worked with in Iraq was attacked only once in nearly a year of missions, a feat the team's commanding officer attributes largely to Taha.

"I have no doubt that he saved lives," Army Capt. David Salazar wrote recently in an e-mail from Korea. "He would constantly tell us of the various locations to avoid and what routes would be safe, as well as times.

"We took all of his advice, and our own intelligence, and avoided conflict all but once during our missions in 11 months."

Taha used his many connections in the community to learn of insurgent attack plans. Talk in the local market was often beneficial, he said.

Salazar and Cardone met Taha in 2007, just a couple of months after insurgents nearly killed him.

"A few weeks after he was with our team, we realized how vital he was to the previous team and how vital he was for our team," said Cardone, who was in charge of Taha and three other interpreters.

"We all got to know him pretty well. When it comes down to interpreters in Iraq, it's a question of how much can you trust someone you don't know. We could definitely see his heart was in the right place."

To keep safe, Taha stayed with the U.S. military almost all the time, leaving only once a month to visit his family. Sura and the baby were in hiding.

"I realized I could not stay all my life on the base, worrying about my family," Taha said.

Salazar knew of Taha's distress and decided to request that Taha and his family move to the United States.

"I felt that his life had been in danger, and with the amount of effort and sacrifice he had given to both his country and our soldiers, he deserved a better life," said Salazar, 29.

Getting out of Iraq

In December 2007, Taha, Sura and their son moved to Jordan. Taha contacted his brother in Germany and asked about U.S. cities with warm, dry climates. They had taken about \$10,000 in savings with them to Jordan and tried to live simply in the expensive country.

They arrived in Tucson seven months later with nothing.

Taha, 33, spends much of his time here waiting.

He waits for the bus, and for a chance to work. He waits in lines for assistance with food and clothing, diapers and toothpaste.

Grace Schuster, a volunteer with the Giving Tree Outreach Program, first met Taha a couple of months ago and now sees him and his family regularly at the program's free dinners on Thursdays and Sundays.

Schuster, 68, recently drove Taha to an Arizona Motor Vehicles Division office so he could start preparing for a driving exam. On the way, Taha confided in her his frustration, and his fear, over not being able to get a job.

He worries about how he'll pay the rent and buy diapers for his son.

"I told him, 'Do not be embarrassed. The way I look at it, you helped our troops and we're the ones, who owe you,' "she said.

Schuster said some refugees she's met over the years told her they were promised a job in their field when they arrived in the United States and are too proud to take anything less.

"That's not Taha. He'll do any kind of work," she said. "I admire the man. Even though he is in pain, he wants to provide for his family."

Taha's dreams for his family here are fairly simple. He would like a modest house and a small car. He would like to start a savings account for his son's college education.

He hasn't had much luck so far. He said he worked at a restaurant for one night, for example, but was let go because of his physical limitations.

Cardone is hoping to help Taha find work with the military again, as a translator or in cultural-awareness training. He is encouraging Taha to draft a new résumé.

"I appreciate his help, but everything is just hope," Taha said. "If I'm alone, I can make it with little money. When I have a baby, a family, a wife, I need to do something serious."

A matter of money

Taha and Sura's small apartment includes some donated furniture, as well as a couch and table Taha found alongside a trash bin and scrubbed clean with a brush.

They received the standard three plates, and three forks, spoons and knives from Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services.

Their rent is \$550 a month. Lutheran Services covered the first two months and will contribute \$450 for the next three months while trying to help Taha find work.

Taha and Sura, 32, also receive food stamps and \$347 per month for living expenses and rent from the Arizona Department of Economic Security.

They are waiting to begin collecting Social Security income, for which they are eligible because they are both disabled. Taha said he was told that could take seven more months or longer.

Renee Luis, director of the Tucson office of Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest, said each person within a family receives about \$425 to get started with food, housing and furniture.

"Most of our families aren't coming with some of these severe medical needs. It is definitely a case-by-case basis as far as determining what the best resources are for them," she said.

The assumption is that people will find work and start becoming self-sufficient within 90 days of arrival, said Bob Carey, vice president for resettlement and migration policy with the International Rescue Committee in New York City.

"The resources of the programs, either public or private, have not kept pace with the needs of the people who are coming in," Carey said. "What we've been doing is urging the State Department to review how they fund and run these programs."

Some of the people have chronic illnesses or ailments, he said, and services are minimal. Many have to wait a long time for disability benefits to kick in, he said.

"They come over to the U.S. and not only have they gone through this trauma and hardship, they also have fairly high expectations about what will be provided to them, and it's understandable they would," Carey said. "They've been injured because of U.S. affiliations."

The agencies and people providing these services are overwhelmed, he said, adding that the faltering economy has made it that much more difficult for people like Taha.

An "anemic" system

There are an estimated 30,000 to 100,000 interpreters and translators still living in Iraq, says Ann McKittrick, a spokeswoman with the non-profit List Project to Resettle Iraqi Allies.

More than 200 Iraqis who fled because of their ties to the U.S. have been safely resettled through the List Project.

"However, there are still nearly 1,500 names on our list, and we receive between 10 and 20 new requests each week," McKittrick said. "We are seeing that the system that is currently designed to help refugees is anemic and ill-equipped to provide meaningful assistance on a large scale."

Salazar said he also believes a debt is owed to people like Taha, interpreters who make sacrifices for the U.S. and for their own country.

"They constantly go out in their communities in fear that they will get killed as a result of what they do," he wrote in an e-mail.

"Some do it because the pay is good, but a majority feel that they are doing their country a service, even if it means they have to make sacrifices."

"What else can I do?"

As promised, Taha sent an e-mail to Salazar as soon as he reached his new home in Tucson. Salazar, in turn, forwarded it to the soldiers who had worked on the team.

It was then that Cardone realized his friend was nearby once again.

"Everyone was waiting for (Taha) to make it back here to the States, and now everyone is asking what they can do to help," Cardone said.

"It's always in the back of my mind, 'What else can I do?' I just want to be able to help him out as much as I can."

On StarNet: Find a slideshow of images from this story at azstarnet.com/slideshows

- Contact Patty Machelor at pmachelor@azstarnet.com or 235-0308.

How to help

Interested in donating time, goods or money to help Taha's family or other refugee families in Tucson? Call Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services at 520-721-4444.