Chandler Award

First Place

Adeniyi Amadou
Syracuse University
'I am not human to them'

Hesham Khater communicates through a computer due to his autism. His parents look to religion to help their son overcome obstacles he faces

Posted: 10/21/08

Hesham Khater lives in a white brick, suburban-style house with red shingles amid manicured gardens and beds of blowing leaves.

It looks like a typical family house in any affluent neighborhood of Syracuse.

As the loose screen door swings open, the living room appears with family portraits overlooking the Persian rug and overstuffed couches. Sitting on the couch are Mohamed Khater, his wife Magda Bayoumi and their oldest son Hesham.

Hesham is autistic.

His mouth open, Hesham stares vacantly into space. His two younger brothers, Ashraf and Ahmed watch him type on a small computer with the help of his mother as she gently guides his right wrist.

This is how he communicates. Hesham cannot speak. An empty gaze and a frozen grin accompany each movement he attempts.

But for his parents, both Syracuse University alumni, it is
important he stays active and continues to learn.

Hesham graduated from Syracuse's Corcoran High School in 2005, his father said pointing proudly at the graduation picture on a nearby table.

Hesham started taking classes at SU last fall. But he wasn't able to continue this semester because he and his family have yet to find someone to help him get around campus every day.

"I need to go back to school," Hesham writes on his computer. "Please find someone for me."

As difficult as autism can be, Hesham and his family have something that lightens the load: faith.

"Our faith is bigger than the pain," Mohamed said.

Hardship, Mohamed added, is a test from God.

The truth, he said, is no training could have prepared his wife and sons for the struggle with autism he's faced, but their faith took on an extra dimension after Hesham was diagnosed with autism.

"We always had faith as Muslims," Mohamed said. "It's coming from Allah. Everything happens for a reason.

"I told (Magda) we must accept what Allah gives us. God is testing us with this. Instead of saying, 'Why us?' We have to say 'Hamdulillah,' thank God, because everything that comes from God is good. It's hard on him, because people don't think he's intelligent."

As his father spoke, Hesham's eyes filled with tears. And as he rocked his body with frustration and gasped for breath, Mohamed
rubbed Hesham's back gently.

Suddenly, Hesham got up and nervously paced the flour, gasping, with a helpless grin on his face. Eventually, he crawled back between his parents onto the couch.

"What's wrong, Hesham?" his father asked in a tender voice.

The son looked away, and before his tears could spill, he buried his face in his father's white shirt. Absorbing his son's muffled cries, the father closed his eyes and whispered something in his ear.

Finally, Hesham mopped his face with the palm of his hands and let out a long sigh.

"I am not human to them," Hesham typed. "I hate the feeling."

For a while father and son sat there, holding each other tightly.

"It's just hard," Hesham typed as he broke into tears again. "I don't like to have people to feel afraid from me."

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Autism is a complex developmental brain disorder, said Dr. Larry Novak, Hesham's family doctor.

The disorder falls under a range of syndromes called pervasive developmental disorders, more commonly referred to today as Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Other disorders under ASD are Asperger's, Rett Syndrome and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. Novak said progresses have been made in the treatment of autism.
Cheli Paetow is a special education teacher who has been working with Hesham for eight years.

Who Hesham really is, Paetow said, only comes out with people who assume he is competent.

"Instead people judge him based on a body he cannot manage."

Beneath his mask, she said, there is a lively soul.

"He is an exceptional individual," Paetow said. "He does as much for my life as I do for him."

Still, Paetow said the findings have proved to be relatively small gains, and the fact is many aspects of autism remain a mystery.

Judging by the wide array of people who fall under the diagnosis, autism is one of the most complicated neurological disorders known, Novak said.

Some diagnosed with autism, like James Burke, a third-year student in the College of Human Ecology, are college educated. He has amassed more than 46 credit hours and has "a lovely 3.4 GPA," Burke said.

Others, like Hesham, can't speak, let alone sustain their attention long enough to do a task for more than a few moments.

There are thousands of autistic people throughout the country aided by facilitated communication, said Douglas Biklen, dean of SU's School of Education and leading facilitated communications advocate. He helped promote the method in the United States in 1992.

The long-term goal of this training is to fade physical support and
eventually enable independent typing, said Marilyn Chadwick, an assistant director at the Facilitated Communication Institute in Syracuse.

The process can be grueling for the patient and his or her family, Chadwick said.

Still they deserve consideration, Hesham's mother Magda said.

Throughout New York state, parents like Mohamed and Magda and educators like Paetow are pushing for research. They are also working to change laws affecting people with disabilities throughout New York.

The struggle of the Khater family is all too familiar to many families across the country.

Estimates of American children with an autism disorder in the United States alone run as high as one in every 150, and one in 94 boys, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And autism is growing at a rate of 10 to 17 percent each year, making it more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes and AIDS combined, according to the Autism Speaks Web site and statistics from the U.S. Department of Education.

"There is still a general lack of awareness," Paetow said. "People with autism are so smart."

During their instructional sessions, Paetow said Hesham often typed the things he wants to write about: autism, Islamic politics and keeping Jerusalem a sacred and peaceful place.

"(Hesham) is a humanitarian," Paetow said.

But Hesham has a number of goals besides writing.
"He really wants to be independent," Magda said. "He wants to fully participate in the community. He wants to be a consultant for autistic kids. He wants to be a normal citizen of this community."

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Magda said Mohamed first noticed the changes in Hesham's behavior when he was between 2 and 3 years old. He'd heard a colleague talking about her autistic nephew. Some of the changes she mentioned about her nephew, Mohamed saw in his son as well.

"I had never heard about it (autism)," Magda said.

One day, Mohamed went to the library, brought home a book about autism and said Hesham had all the characteristics, Magda said.

Magda couldn't believe it at first. But soon after, she, too, started to notice changes in Hesham.

"He used to say a few words," she said. "He stopped talking. He used to run to greet me when I got home from work, but now he just stood there doing whatever."

Eventually, Mohamed said Hesham started to develop classic autism symptoms: impaired communication and social skills, such as delay and eventually total lack of spoken language, and restricted and repetitive behavior such as flapping of the hands.

Now a stay-at-home mother, Magda said she dropped her job as an assistant manager at a retail store to take care of Hesham full time in an effort to ensure his life continues as normally as possible.

Soon after his parents noticed changes, in 1989, neurologists at the
Institute for Basic Research in Developmental Disabilities in Staten Island, N.Y., confirmed Hesham's autism. Magda almost found the news unbearable; she said she felt caught in a very bad dream.

She spent the next two to three months holding Hesham, because the neurologists predicted he wouldn't recognize her eventually.

"We were glued together," she said. "I didn't want him to forget me."

Magda said she felt tired all over a number of times.

"Mohamed was working long hours," she said. "I was overwhelmed."

One day, when Hesham was 8 years old, he ran away.

"I was nine months pregnant," Magda said. "Hesham used to run away as soon as we turned our backs. That day Mohamed fell asleep," Magda said, laughing. "The baby was due in four days, and Mohamed insisted that I stayed home and rest up while he went looking for Hesham."

Ignoring her husband's plea, she dragged herself miles away from their neighborhood and up and down East Genesee Street, searching for her son. She finally found him wandering, barefoot, at the corner of East Genesee Street and Brookford Road.

She draped her body over him, pressing his head against her pregnant belly. Two hours later, she was in labor at Crouse Hospital.

Magda said she sometimes locked herself in the shower to wrestle with her feelings. Sometimes she found herself crying quietly in
the dark. "But most of the time I prayed, read the Quran," she said.

Hesham's parents said their son has been written off as profoundly retarded by some specialists. She said some even dismissed him as a hopeless case, and in the words of an evaluating neurologist in Queens, N.Y., said he had "little hope for improvement."

"It's almost as if they were saying 'dump him, take care of Ashraf and Ahmed, have another child and go on with your life. Forget about him, he is not going to know who you are.' This is how it's going to be in the future," she said.

"They only talked to me," Magda said. "They wouldn't even look at him. He is a human being."

At that time, some specialists advised Magda and Mohamed to put Hesham in a special-need institution. Magda said the idea overwhelmed her. This would have meant abandoning their attempt to help him reach some degree of autonomy. But she knew that if Hesham's condition did not improve soon, they might have to consider it.

Mohamed and Magda couldn't bring themselves to place Hesham in a special-need institution.

"I'll die before I put my child there," Magda said.

Instead the family left Queens for Syracuse in the early '90s to find better help.

"The city school system (in Central New York) was known for servicing and integrating kids with disabilities," Mohamed said.

Hesham's parents were determined that their son would become autonomous one day. They enrolled him at Syracuse's Jowonio

The Jowonio School operates as an inclusive preschool in which children with and without special needs learn in the same classrooms, said school director Ellen Barnes.

Hesham thrived in the inclusive classrooms at Jowonio, Barnes said. During that time, Magda said, she noticed significant improvement for Hesham, "especially communication and social skills."

"They (the people at Jowonio) were my extended family," Magda said. "Still are."

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Before moving to Syracuse, Magda said she often felt alone. She felt she had failed. She tried to tell herself she did everything she could. But sometimes, Mohamed said, they can't help but to blame themselves.

"The guilt is overwhelming," Magda agreed. Her voice broke, her eyes welled up with tears. "Maybe we could have spoken to him more, maybe we didn't spend enough time with him. I don't know."

"It's not their fault. They've certainly done everything they can do to create a world where Hesham can express himself," Barnes said.

And at times she was completely overwhelmed with feelings of helplessness, anger and guilt.

One day, Magda said she was watching Hesham play with his cousins. "(That's when) I broke," she says. "I got angry with God. I asked God, 'Why me? I was praying for you, fasting for you, doing everything for you. My sister never prays, and you give her
beautiful children. Why do you give me this?"

"God said to me, 'It's because Hesham needs a strong mother.'"

That day, the day God spoke to her, Magda said she understood that Hesham was a blessing, a gift from God.

As she spoke, she put her hand around Hesham. His body fell onto her, she pressed her lips against his head. On his other side, Mohamed leaned closer and put his hand on Hesham's shoulder.

"She is a strong woman," her husband agreed, citing verse 286 of the second chapter of the Quran: "God said, 'On no soul does Allah place a burden greater than it can bear.'"

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Hesham's autism has not only affected his parents, but also Hesham's brothers.

One night, Magda recalled, she was in bed, ill, and her 2-month-old Ahmed was crying. Ashraf, who was then 5 years old, hunched over the toddler's crib and said: "Stop crying. My mom has a headache, I'm already taking care of Hesham, and I can't take care of both of you." Magda laughed at the memory.

The funny thing, she said, was "Ashraf wasn't really taking care of anyone. If anything, he was giving me the hardest times," she chuckled. "But here you have this 5-year-old boy talking to a 2-month-old baby, telling him to stop crying, because he had to take care of his 7-year-old brother."

Magda said the incident made her realize that maybe Ashraf felt he had to grow faster, that he had to take some of the pressure, too.
"I didn't even want him to think of something like that," Magda said, running her hand alongside Ashraf's back.

Every night Ashraf spends minutes brushing Hesham's teeth, a finger in his older brother's mouth to prevent him for swallowing the toothpaste. For such a seemingly simple task, there are hundreds of ways to get it wrong, Ashraf said.

In fact, he said, his brother's autism dominates the family's simple routines - walks around the neighborhood after dinner, grocery shopping, dinnertime, bedtime, etc.

Unfailingly polite, Ashraf endured strangers' disrespectful comments about Hesham.

"What's wrong with your brother? 'Is he crazy?" 'Your brother is stupid.'"

They were insensitive and unabashed, but Ashraf never lost his temper.

"I don't get mad at these people," Ashraf said. "I just explain them (Hesham's situation)."

Family friend Tom Ligoci said Ashraf sees his brother as another normal person.

"Ashraf sees his brother as an extension of who is," he said. "I think sometimes he looks at Hesham and says 'that could be me.'"

Hesham and Ashraf do everything and go everywhere together: to the park, to play basketball, to the beach, to a picnic or simply down the street.

"I never felt like I don't want to take Hesham anywhere," he said.
"Even with all the noise he makes, it's always good to have him around."

He fell silent for a moment.

"I think about the future with him," Ashraf said. "(When my parents get older), how independent will he be from me and my little brother? Will he have to live with me or live on his own?"

He paused.

"I think he won't be able to live on his own."
Middle ground

Middle Eastern students work to reconcile home cultures with American ways at SU

Posted: 9/10/08

On a muggy, mid-summer afternoon in August, a group of mild-mannered students wove through the busy streets of Syracuse University and swept into the campus Starbucks. As they made their way to the patio to join friends, the smells of oven-baked pastries and freshly brewed coffee gave way to pricey colognes and cigarette smoke.

On the patio, the young men all embraced fondly, roared with deafening laughter and greeted each other with "Assalamu alaikum," the standard Muslim greeting that means "Peace be upon you." They sat, anchored to the black plastic chairs, puffing Marlboro Mediums and talking until afternoon turned to dusk.

These students, most of them from the Middle East, gathered that day to catch up and discuss their experience as international students. The college life at SU had brought many challenges that none of them ever imagined. And for some of these young international students, the treacherous weather and the drudgery were only part of the difficulty.

A New Wave of Muslim Students
There have been a diminishing number of Middle Eastern enrollments since the media had vastly reported Sept. 11. The Institute of International Education published a report online in 2004 that showed a 10 percent decline in the enrollment of Middle Eastern students in U.S. colleges. In 2004 alone, student numbers from both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were down 25 percent from the year before.

Since then, the U.S. has boosted efforts to bring over Middle Eastern students, and as a result, enrollments from the Middle East increased by 25 percent in 2006-2007, according to the Web site Open Doors 2007. The most notable increase was in the number of students from Saudi Arabia. In fact, the total number of Saudi Arabian students attending U.S. schools - 7,886 - is the result of a large Saudi Arabian government scholarship program launched in 2005.

While it was not even ranked in the top 25 institutions hosting international students in 2006-2007, SU has been a model of diversity and acceptance since Sept. 11.

Fariba Rahmanzadeh, an international student advisor at the Slutzker Center for International Services, said SU saw the aftermath of Sept. 11 as an opportunity to increase mutual understanding and develop an even stronger bilateral relationship between American students and Middle Eastern students. Rahmanzadeh said the effort by the university to raise awareness about religious diversity is the cause for the new influx of Muslim and Arab students on campus today.

Assimilation as an Islamic Duty at SU

Two years have passed since Ahmed Alakeel left behind the vast
and safe comfort of his parents' home in Jubail, a prosperous city nestled in the open spaces of the Persian Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia, for a cramped, drafty studio on the crowded and cold SU campus. Alakeel, a freshman information studies major, had heard stories about Saudi students' hardships on U.S. campuses, but the word was that SU was just a different place. A good place for Saudis, he said. Now, he looks at home in a crew-neck T-shirt and slacks.

At 18, Abdulmohsen Alfozan, a student in the English Language Institute (ELI) at SU and the son of a Saudi diplomat, is already well-traveled, well-read and boasts the polished mannerism and self assurance that comes with wide and extensive social experience.

The teenager could pass for your everyday SU student, but the Canadian-born Saudi is an unlikely student on campus. In fact, his buoyant spirits and boyish charm are a regale blend of two cultures, two conflicting worlds: on one hand, the olive-skinned baby face and the thick, elegant Middle Eastern accent are suggestive of his Arabic origins. On the other hand, he looks effortlessly "American" with his untucked green polo shirt, unpressed khakis and loafers without socks; the BlackBerry systematically clasped to his belt goes off with unrelenting text messages.

Sunk into his chair among other Muslim international students, Alfozan can talk openly about his time here in the U.S. The affable teenager speaks highly of his experience as a Muslim student at SU.

"I am just very happy to be here," he said with youthful abandon. There is little that he is not emphatic about.

But hunger for assimilation can turn to gluttony, said Patrick
Schloppa, an international student from Berlin who studied at SU last semester.

The young German knows Saudis well; he spent weeks in their midst, sharing classrooms at ELI and joining them in gatherings like this one. "He is half Saudi, half German," his Middle Eastern friends joke.

"(Saudis) study the streets, the cars, the way American dress and talk," Schloppa said, putting his fingers around his eyes to create mock glasses. "They see everything. They take notes of everything Americans do. You can tell they love the life here. Ahmed even started to watch American football," he added, rolling his eyes.

Young Arabs like Alakeel are part of a generation of modern-minded, international, Muslim-born students who crave acceptance from their American counterparts and forcefully condemn the extremists they feel have defiled their religion.

"If I could, I would kill bin Laden myself," Alakeel said emphatically.

More moderate in his speech and his bearing, Ziad Algohaiman, a graduate student at SU, seldom brings up the topics of religion and is reluctant to talk about his negative experiences. He believes that the two conflicting worlds - Islamic and American - have far more in common than what divides them. Like Alfozan, he has assimilated perfectly.

Yet for others, assimilation brings conflicting emotions.

Still a religion under watch?
Though he lacks the polish of Alfozan, Dhari Al Abdulhadi, another SU grad student, is no less emphatic in his speech and his convictions. Often taking the opposite and unpopular side of any argument, the young man from Kuwait City is almost recklessly outspoken about Americans. He said he often finds Americans' arrogance and ignorance off-putting. And in many ways, Al Abdulhadi has resisted changes and assimilation.

Al Abdulhadi speaks in a choppy English peppered with Arabic expressions, and he admittedly only befriends international students here on campus. He said he would never marry an American woman, even if she were willing to convert to Islam.

Suddenly, Al Abdulhadi wavers. The waitress at a local restaurant had brought a tray of ice tea to Al Abdulhadi's table. An awkward silence ensues.

"Have a nice day, guys," she says cheerfully, after serving the refreshments. Al Abdulhadi doesn't even bother smiling in return, but instead offers a polite but distant nod, leans over the threadbare table and resumes the conversation.

"Even when (U.S. students) are friendly with us (international Muslim students), you can tell that there is something inside of them ... deep down they don't like us. They don't trust us. I can feel it," Al Abulhadi whispers, scowling as the waitress disappears inside the shop.

He leans back in his chair, straightening up before adding: "They are afraid because they don't know us. They think we are going to do something to them. We scare them."

"I wouldn't say scared; maybe intimidated," Alfozan said from his seat at the table, shifting uncomfortably.
"No, they are scared," Al Abdulhadi shot back, stomping his sandaled foot on the pavement.

The other students keep mum. An argument follows.

This is an all-too-common challenge for many foreign-born Muslim students, here at SU and more generally throughout the U.S., the struggle to coalesce Islamic traditions with American college culture.

For Alfozan, Al Abdulhadi is too rigid, too stern in his interpretation of Islam and traditions and for the young Saudi, the irascible Kuwaiti is a vivid and uncomfortable reminder of the rigorous conservatism they left behind in their respective native countries.

"(Americans) look down on Mexicans for example, but us (Muslims), it's fear," Al Abdulhadi said. "They look at us with fear." He pauses before finally amending the thought.

"I mean they are not bad people, they just stereotype a lot. But this is capitalism, so yes we are integrated ... I mean we have money; we pay full, out-of-state tuition, so of course they are going to integrate us."

Home away from home

"Muslim international students sometimes keep to themselves. They stay here four years, get their degree and they are gone," is how Nasri Abdel-Aziz summed up Al Abdulhadi's attitude in a phone interview.

Abdel-Aziz, now an instructor at the State University of New York
College of Environmental Science and Forestry, speaks slowly and methodically. The Jerusalem-born Palestinian has lived in Syracuse almost all of his life and now calls it his home.

"Now I am very public about my faith. I want all people to know that I am Muslim," Abdel-Aziz, who also sits on the Shura, or board of the mosque, said. "I have never experienced anything bad about being Muslim here at Syracuse. People here at Syracuse are not just tolerant; they are accepting."
'It's not supposed to be easy'

Students struggle to keep traditional Ramadan customs

Posted: 9/23/08

As dusk fell on a recent Friday, Muslims with ethnicities as diverse as Afghan, African, black, Pakistani, Palestinian, Saudi, white and Yemeni strode down Comstock Avenue. They were dressed in baggy jeans, dark business suits, tan slacks and traditional white dishdashas with matching flat-topped headdresses.

As they reached the doorway steps, the men came to a synchronized halt, kicked off their footwear and entered the mosque.

They had gathered to perform the Maghreb, or evening prayer, break their fast and celebrate Ramadan.

The ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, Ramadan, is considered a Holy month by Muslims. This year, the holiday falls in September. It is the month they believe Allah revealed the first verses of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad. Of the five pillars of Islam, the fourth is Sawm, or fasting during Ramadan.

"It's a very unifying experience for a very ethnically diverse Muslim community," said Gustav Niebuhr, a professor of religion and media at Syracuse University.

Ramadan, which began Sept. 1, is arguably the most important aspect of the Muslim life. It is meant to teach compassion, patience
and selflessness, said Ihsan Bagby, a National Board Member of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the largest civil liberties and advocacy group for Muslims in North America.

Each day, from dawn to dusk, every adult male and female Muslim who is physically able is required to forgo eating, drinking, sex, smoking and other worldly pleasures, said Hammam AlMakadma, an SU grad student.

"It's not just your stomach fasting," AlMakadma said. "It's your eyes; it's your ears; it's your limbs."

Special meals are eaten before and after each day of fasting: suhoor before the dawn prayers and iftar, the evening meal. Iftar is often eaten communally and includes dates, which Muslims eat as a symbolic breaking of fast. According to tradition, AlMakadma said, the Prophet Muhammad broke his own fast for the iftar dinner by consuming a date.

The mosque, or masjid, holds daily iftars, where hundreds come together at sunset to break their fast, said Ziad Aljohaiman, a student in the SU English Language Institute. And while many Muslims break their fasts at the mosque, others send food and money to the mosque for others to break their fast because Ramadan is also a time of charitable outreach.

"Ramadan is a chance to serve and understand the suffering of others," AlMakadma said.

Matan Cafri, a sophomore in The College of Arts and Sciences, said the Abrahamic faiths - Christianity, Islam and Judaism - all have doctrines that emphasize the idea of self-denial, fasting and sacrifice.

Cafri said the interfaith relations at SU have transformed him.
Having grown up Jewish with little positive exposure to Muslims and little interest in gaining any, he said he now counts Muslims at SU among his closest friends.

"You know what, they are just like us," Cafri said. "We are all the same."

Iftar dinners as social gathering

The Islamic Society of Central New York Mosque is a stark brick building, with a blue and white façade, that sits along Comstock Avenue. It has no dome, no high-ceilinged rooms, no elaborate murals. It is the place for Muslims to gather and break their fast.

After their prayer, which consisted of a series of raka'at, a ritual of bending and bowing accompanied by the proper invocations and prayers, men and women, who pray in separate rooms, shared pitted, gooey dates and cold bottles of Poland Spring water before huddling in the room below to join in a festive dinner.

The food - hunks of beef over a mountain of yellow rice - was generously poured onto paper plates and rapidly passed around. Sleeves rolled back; fast-moving children first, then adults, sat down on the sprawling Oriental rugs to break their fast. They ate heartily, and finally, as they sat back full, they looked refreshed and energized.

"You feel especially happy when you eat iftar," AlMakadma said. "It's really not the same feeling than when you are eating a normal meal."

Iftar dinners like the one served at the mosque are intended to be community and social gatherings where families and friends join to
feast together at the end of the day, Bagby said.

Students who cannot attend the iftar dinners served at the mosque can eat one on campus.

At SU, 25 to 30 students attend iftar dinners, catered and hosted by Shaw Hall, independently of SU, and sponsored by the Muslim Student Association, Monday through Thursday, during Ramadan.

"It makes it easy on Muslim students," said Ahmed Al-Salem, a sophomore information studies student and president of the MSA. "They feel at home away from home."

Ramadan away from home

Many foreign-Muslim students attending SU are observing Ramadan away from home, but not without challenges.

Ramadan is the time when first-generation immigrants feel the most homesick, Bagby said. The fasting can be especially hard for students, like Aljohaiman, who are fasting for the first time in a non-Muslim environment.

"I'm all alone here," said Hessah Alojayan, an English Language Institute student. "After iftar, everybody goes back to their place, and that's it. We are done."

Alojayan said that in most Muslim and Arab nations, iftar is a social gathering that extended well past midnight.

In many Islamic countries, Ramadan is celebrated nationally. That means that not only just about everybody fasts, but also many restaurants and businesses trim down their working hours, and
schools close earlier. In the U.S., international Muslim students agreed that they have to fast amid constant temptation.

"It's hard to watch people eat," Aljohaiman said. "In America, we are surrounded by food. It's everywhere: in the class, in the street, on the TV. It's everywhere."

For Aljohaiman, the powerful growl of his stomach is a reminder that Ramadan is a time when food takes lesser significance.

Some Muslim students, however, said that Ramadan in America should be no different than Ramadan anywhere else.

"My daily routine doesn't change (Ramadan)," AlMakadma said. "I don't lie around and sleep all day waiting for the sun to go down. Then you're missing the whole point of fasting. It's not supposed to be easy. Ramadan doesn't keep me from being productive and do the things I am supposed to do here."

Sitting by the rain-streaked window of the Marshall Street Starbucks, AlMakadma said he was raised a devout Muslim in his native Saudi Arabia. He began reading the Quran in second grade and started fasting soon after.

With his narrow face, hooded dark eyes and sharp nose, he looked scantily fed, wearing a droopy short-sleeved shirt that hung loose on his frame.

"You are supposed to accomplish more during Ramadan," he said. "I go to classes, take exams and stay active. It's more demanding, but it's also more rewarding that way."

A time of peace
For many Muslim students, Ramadan is a period of intense spiritual exploration. It allows introspection and the search for purity within oneself, AlMakadma said.

"It's a chance to think about life, a chance to be grateful," he said. "It's a time of peace."

Ramadan is not just a personal struggle, some students agreed, stressing the importance of community building and interfaith understanding. It is a time to reach across cultural lines, Bagby said.

Aljohaiman said that inviting non-Muslim to the iftar is an occasion to teach them about Islam and break down the typical stereotype that casts Muslims as fear mongers and terrorists.

For AlMakadma, Ramadan is a good time to educate Muslims and non-Muslims alike on what Islam really says about religious freedom.

"There is no compulsion in religion. Every soul is free to believe what he or she wants," AlMakadma said, quoting the Quran.

He said, "Islam is not the faith of fanatics."
'All alone'

Student faces life after turbulent past in Iraq

By: Adeniyi Amadou

Posted: 9/11/08

There are moments when Mustafa Mohammed just wants to flee back to Iraq. Often he dreams of going back to Baghdad. But then he calls home, and the dreams end right then. Every time he speaks with his family on the phone, they remind Mohammed that the worsening of the war has made his return impossible.

He recognizes that as a young educated man in America - coming from a nation where 80 percent of the population is illiterate - he is in a right place to help Iraq.

Mohammed arrived in Syracuse one year ago to work on his master's degree in computer science under the Fulbright Program.

According to research conducted and recently published by TIME Magazine, Iraq's civil war has forced more than two million Iraqis refugees to foreign lands. Though 66,000 Iraqis have applied for asylum, just 14,000 of them have been granted refugee status by the United Nations and have had their files sent to the State Department for resettlement in America.

So far, 2,700 have been brought to the U.S.

When Mohammed first came to Syracuse, he hardly left his hotel room on James Street. So, Anwar Razouqi, a telecommunication management master student at Northeastern University and a childhood friend of Mohammed, took the eight-hour train ride to Syracuse. There, he helped Mohammed find a comfortable apartment in a safer part of town. They bought groceries together and took care of class registration and spent sleepless nights talking about home. Finally, once Mohammed was settled, Razouqi took the train back to Boston.

"He's all alone here," said Elane Granger, associate director for student services at the Slutzker Center for International Services at Syracuse University. "No family, no relatives. He suffered an awful lot and continues to suffer a lot. But he is not a person that will say he needs help. As a mother, I know this is painful."

So Granger and her daughter Sara Carrasco, a sophomore in The College of Arts and Sciences and one of Mohammed's closest friends at SU, brought him home for dinner and encouraged him to blend in. They wanted him to feel at home.

Although this would never be home, Mohammed said he knows he is incredibly lucky to have a new life at all.
"Once you come to America, even if it is for school, you are targeted," Razzouqi said. "Any affiliation with the U.S. is very dangerous back home, but Mustafa will be fine."

The Scholar

Handsome and well groomed, with a carefully trimmed goatee, Mohammed is intensely private. Still, the unobtrusive Iraqi caught the notice of many within the Syracuse community.

"He keeps mostly to himself, but you can tell that he is very intelligent," said John Wilde, a salesman at Charney's, a clothing store where Mohammed often shops. "But the things he overcame," Wilde adds shaking his head. "That's just amazing."

On a phone interview, Razzouqi said that because of his self-effacing nature, Mohammed is an easy man to underestimate.

"But he is one of the most intelligent persons I have ever met," Razzouqi said.

The only boy and the youngest of an educated middle-class family of five children, Mohammed grew up in a prosperous neighborhood of Baghdad. Still fearful for the lives of his loved ones, he asks that the name and profession of his father and the name of his neighborhood remain anonymous.

Before the Iraq War he would have never been this "paranoid," he added.

Life in Baghdad

Life wasn't always good in Saddam's Iraq, but for Mohammed and his family, it was relatively easy. It all came crashing down when the war began. Before the war, Mohammed said, the neighborhood was as peaceful as any place on earth - a thriving place of ethnic, racial and religious communities.

Mohammed remembers all that. The young Iraqi speaks in a low, unchanging voice, never pausing to collect his thoughts. When the war came, and Saddam was taken away, the peaceful times left with him.

Today, Mohammed's neighborhood sits along rotted roads, next to heaps of garbage. Dilapidated brick homes are missing parts of their roofs and stand empty. There is no drainage, no sewerage, no water supply and no electricity. As many as eight in 10 are unemployed, said Mohammed. Most of the children are not in school and few of them live to be legal.

Speaking in slow, methodic English, the young Iraqi painfully tells of witnessing atrocious sights.

Once, after a Shiite shrine had been violated, men in battered pickups with mounted guns swept in, destroying Mohammed's Sunni-populated neighborhood, shooting and burning alive a throng of inhabitants, including women, children, elderly and infirm, who had found refuge inside a mosque. Over the ensuing days, Mohammed said, the armed men, their heads swathed in traditional black-checkered scarves and black balaclavas, flooded the neighborhood and continued their brutal crackdown, indiscriminately beating and manhandling residents.
The turning point

In Baghdad, Mohammed worked for an American-based company called Reed Incorporated. According to its official website, Reed Inc. offers logistics, security, construction and project management services in high-risk, multi-cultural, Third World environments. Since March 2003, Reed has been operating in Iraq, providing support for the rehabilitation of the Iraqi Media Network (IMN). Mohammed diligently worked his way up from translator to liaison officer between the company, IMN and Iraq's Ministry of Interior.

Marius van der Riet, Mohammed's boss at Reed, said that Mohammed often risked his life sneaking through the city to get to the company's offices located in the International Zone (formerly known as the Green Zone), the highly protected area where coalition forces live and work. Insurgents, most of them followers of al-Sadr, hated those Iraqis that worked for American or international companies. They considered them traitors.

"It's very real," van der Riet said in a phone interview. "Everyday Mustafa had to find a way to meet us at the safe house where a full- armored personal security detail convoy would take him to work in the Green Zone."

Among Iraq's Diaspora, Mohammed's story is a familiar one.

Since the war has started, countless neighborhoods like Mohammed's have borne the brunt of the war with no clear ethnic or religious lines. Insurgents are splintered into many competing factions and warring among all factions has increased, Mohammed said. "(The factions') main concern is to maintain their fiefs against rivals rather than protecting the civilians they claim to represent," Mohammed said. And amid restless insurgency and government attacks, he added, it is the Iraqi civilians - Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish alike - who suffer the most.

One night, after dinner - shortly before Mohammed came to Syracuse - a group of armed men knocked at Mohammed's metal door and ordered him to step outside his apartment. Once outside, the gunmen put a weapon to his head, read verses of the Quran and ordered him to quit his job or he and his family would be killed.

"I was working for an American company. (Insurgents) don't just go after you, they go after your family first," Mohammed said. "For them, it was the price you had to pay for collaborating with Americans."

Sitting on the paved brick terrace of an empty local café this summer, Mohammed spoke about his past and how it felt to live in Baghdad.

"The only way that I can put it is like from the moment that you open your eyes in the morning to the moment that you open your eyes in the next morning, you are scared. You are totally scared."

A few months after the gunmen came to Mohammed's apartment, his cousin, Abdul Kader, and his brother-in-law, Haider, were kidnapped in the street of Baghdad in broad daylight. Weeks later, neighbors stumbled across Haider's mutilated corpse; they found it rotting on a nearby street.

"We didn't allow his mother or my sister to see it," Mohammed said. Clearly Haider had been tortured for days before being assassinated, he said.
"I still feel responsible for the death of Haider," Mohammed said. "I feel so guilty."

As for Abdul Kader, he has not returned. "I have lost hope," Mohammed said. "I'm pretty sure he's dead."

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