

# These refugees lied to escape Iraq a decade ago. Now, the U.S. might send them back.

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By [Rachel Weiner](#)

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Eleven years ago, two Iraqi brothers stranded at a refugee camp in Jordan made a fateful choice they thought was really no choice at all.

Determined not to return to a country where they thought they would be killed, they obscured their relationship with a third brother, who was accused of terrorism ties and ultimately linked to the kidnapping of a U.S. contractor and others in Iraq.

The brothers, with their wives and children, were allowed into the United States. And over the past decade, they built a life in Fairfax, Va., finding work and making friends, having picnics and visiting the zoo. Each brother has two children born in the United States.

Now, Yousif al-Mashhadani, 35, his brother, Adil Hasan, 39, and Hasan's wife, Enas Ibrahim, 32, have been convicted in federal court in Alexandria on fraud charges. With all three at risk of deportation, friends and supporters say a good family is being torn apart and are pushing for them to be allowed to remain in the country.

"Justice cries out for compassion in this case," Marie Monsen, who worked with the refugees as a church volunteer, wrote in a letter to the court.

Federal prosecutors said they pursued the cases in hopes of catching Majid al-Mashhadani, who the government believes was involved in the kidnapping and had been released from prison in Iraq after only a couple of years. But authorities have given no indication that the three refugees have provided useful information about the crime or Majid's whereabouts.

"I'm not sure how it accomplished anything," said Ibrahim's attorney, Lana Manitta. "I don't think they're any closer to getting the answers they need."

Judge Leonie M. Brinkema last month sentenced the brothers to only the three months they have spent in jail for their crimes, but acknowledged that they would be transferred immediately to immigration custody.

"This is a tragic case," she said in court. "But the law is what it is."

She questioned why Ibrahim, who has not yet been sentenced, was targeted at all. She was prosecuted in large part to give “incentives for her husband and brother-in-law to give information on the kidnapping and torture of an American citizen,” Assistant U.S. Attorney Gordon Kromberg said in court.

He said she was also “complicit” in the decision to lie to a United Nations refugee agency.

The brothers and their families fled Iraq in 2006, when sectarian violence in the country was at its height. When the family arrived in Jordan, Ibrahim was pregnant with her first child. She and her sister Rashad, Yousif al-Mashhadani’s wife, both had their first children at the refugee camp.

While pleading guilty, Hasan explained his fear of being sent back to Iraq.

“I am Sunni, and I will be killed by the Sunnis because I was working in the Green Zone,” he said. “The Shiites will kill me because I am Sunni.”

Both brothers had worked for a U.S.-supported anti-corruption agency in Iraq known at the time as the Commission on Public Integrity. Dozens of their co-workers were assassinated to keep investigations from coming to fruition.

In court, Hasan said he personally knew 56 people who had been killed. According to court filings, 65 members of the watchdog agency have been assassinated. Arthur Brennan, who worked on corruption in Iraq for the State Department in 2007, wrote to the judge that Iraqis connected to law enforcement at the time were “in an extremely dangerous situation.”

So, knowing their brother had been arrested and accused of involvement in terrorism, Hasan and Mashhadani hid their relationship. For good measure, they exaggerated the intensity of the threats they had faced for working with Americans in Baghdad. And when they filled out their U.S. naturalization forms, they did not correct the errors.

Hasan has pleaded guilty to naturalization fraud, Mashhadani to conspiracy to commit immigration fraud. Both agreed to cooperate with immigration authorities. Ibrahim admitted lying about her income to secure a car loan two years ago, a charge that does not automatically trigger deportation proceedings. The families declined to comment for this story.

While in Virginia, the families lived a “spartan existence” so they would not rely on charity for too long, Monsen recalled, although they always scrounged to serve volunteers huge home-cooked meals. They went on to help new refugees as they were helped, and neighbors say they were always willing to lend a tool or offer a ride.

“Yousif and his family had very little during this trying time, but this never stopped their generosity,” said Aaron Weiss, who met the family as a volunteer with the International Rescue Committee.

Ninos Youkhana, whose parents fled Iraq in the 1970s, met Hasan working at the Iraqi Embassy in Washington. Only weeks later, when she was having trouble with her roommate, Hasan and Ibrahim invited her to live with them.

For six months they housed her and cooked her meals, “and not once did they ever ask for any financial reimbursement from me,” she wrote in a letter to the court.

She said Hasan also helped fight an attempt to block Iraqi Christians abroad from voting in 2014 parliamentary elections.

When interviewed by FBI agents this year, Hasan described a life of fear in Iraq, telling them he was once shot at while driving to work and was detained for several hours by members of a Shiite militia.

But while in Jordan applying for refugee status, the brothers fabricated a far more elaborate tale in which Hasan was kidnapped for a month and their parents’ home was set on fire.

Although they have admitted those lies and expressed regret, both brothers maintain that they know nothing about the actions or whereabouts of Majid al-Mashhadani, who according to prosecutors had admitted his involvement in the 2004 kidnapping of an American contractor and four others.

A paper with Yousif al-Mashhadani’s fingerprint on it was found in the farmhouse where the hostages were kept. However, there is no evidence the print was left during the kidnapping and he has not been charged in connection with that crime.

Another brother, according to court filings, listed Majid al-Mashhadani on his immigration papers and is now a U.S. citizen.

Roy Hallums, the contractor who was kidnapped and rescued 10 months later, was unable to see or understand his captors. But he is sure the brothers are lying now.

“In the Middle East and in Iraq, everything is based on family,” Hallums said. “So I don’t believe for one second that these guys didn’t know what was going on.”

Even if they didn’t, immigration foes see justice being done.

“Their first interaction with the U.S. government was to lie,” said Mark Krikorian of the Center for Immigration Studies, a think tank that opposes most new immigration.

Until this March, the family would not have had to worry about being sent back to Iraq. Only in April, after years of refusal, did the Iraqi government [agree to start cooperating](#) with American deportation efforts.

But a federal judge in Detroit has [temporarily halted those deportations](#) in response to a lawsuit from the American Civil Liberties Union arguing that it is too dangerous to deport people to the country.

Although it is unclear what will happen to the three refugees, in court last week Hasan spoke as if he was saying goodbye.

“Thank you to the United States for hosting me for nine years,” he said.

Before he was taken back to jail and then to immigration custody, he shook the hands of the prosecutors who had put him there.

“I’m really thankful,” he said, “and I love this country.”

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Rachel Weiner tries to cover Alexandria's federal court from a small windowless room with no cellphone access. She sometimes ventures outside to write about crime in Alexandria and Arlington. [Follow](#) 

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