

A journey to the unknown

Naseer Naseer, Personal Support Programme Counsellor with STARTTS



Hailing from all over the globe, STARTTS' workers bring a diverse array of experiences and cultural perspectives that adds to the richness of our work. Many share similar stories to our clients having experienced persecution, escape, loss, dispossession, dangerous journeys and cultural adjustment.

Mr Naseer Naseer has recently joined the STARTTS team. An exile from Iran incarcerated in Curtain, Naseer embodies the resilience and generosity of so many refugee arrivals that have arrived on our shores.

Naseer was just four years old when the trucks came to take his family away. Although Iraq had been their home for generations, as far as Saddam's government was concerned, his family's Iranian heritage marked them as enemies.

Dumped just over the Iranian border Naseer, his mother and four siblings were left with nothing. Naseer's two other brothers were taken elsewhere, along with thousands of other fit young men with Iranian heritage. Many never returned. To this day, their families do not know what happened to them. Naseer's brothers were lucky, they joined the rest of the family after one month.

Bewildered and petrified, Naseer's family lived in makeshift tents just over the border for the first two months. Two more months were spent in detention before some strangers came to their rescue. Iraqis who had been banished to Iran years earlier sponsored their release from the camp and helped them with accommodation and other practical matters.

"My older brothers and sisters were much more affected than me," Naseer says of the deportation to Iran.

"I didn't really have the connections, but for my older brother; his friends, studies, language, culture and connections were in Iraq.

Despite their Iranian heritage and forced removal from Iraq, Naseer and his family were not recognised as Iranian citizens. They became stateless. People without a place to call home.

"It didn't affect me too much. I attended an Iranian school and after a few years, I was barely distinguishable from the other students," Naseer explained.

"My brothers had to do the most difficult work in Iran, just to keep a roof over our head. They worked hard but for the lowest pay and conditions," he said.

Meanwhile, Naseer was distinguishing himself as a top student. A love of Arabic and Persian literature had stimulated his interest in English writings. At the completion of high school he was accepted into university to study English and literature. Whilst at university he tutored fellow students in Arabic and Persian literature.

It was during these years that Naseer came to understand what being stateless meant.

Notwithstanding his academic excellence, Naseer was unable to secure a decent job when he finished university. Only citizens could work as government translators or English teachers. There was a tiny proportion of this sort of work in the private sector, but the pay was pitiful and conditions poor.

"I had to lie to get employment. You could get forged documents or pretend you had lost your papers or something. Some institutes were private. They paid little money, more like student jobs. I was the only graduate," Naseer said.

Movement throughout Iran was problematic for Naseer and those like him. To visit another city or town they had

to apply for movement leave. In protest Naseer and his friends, who could pass themselves off as Iranians, often refused to apply for papers. Government officials would regularly stop buses and other forms of transport to ensure non-citizens had the correct travel documents.

"You're not here or there. You have nothing under your feet. You're always scared you'll fall down and there will be nothing to support you," Naseer explained.

"The worst days were the days of the elections. Everyone would be speaking about it and supporting different people but I was out. I was out of those things.

"For 20 years we lived as refugees in a country. Going to school and university and living with them. But we were second class citizens.

"For how long was it going to be like this? Twenty years we waited. If we had hope that things would change in the following ten years we would have waited. But 20 years went by and we were still waiting," he lamented.

In 1999 Naseer escaped on a false Iraqi passport. Escaping Iran was easy. It was not until he left the country that danger really started. If Naseer was caught by another country they would send him to Iraq (not Iran), where he would almost certainly be imprisoned, tortured and possibly executed.

His first stop was Malaysia. It was the only country where he could live, albeit for only two weeks, without a visa.

His plan from there was to head to Sweden, where one of his brothers was living.

"I had an offer to fly to Sweden, but I didn't have enough money. And the passport I'd be shown freaked me out. It was so bad, a very obvious forgery," Naseer said.

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"To this day sometimes I speak with people who don't understand statelessness, the word to describe feeling in limbo.

"I still had some cash that I saved, zipped inside my underpants. A people smuggler in Malaysia got us false Indonesian visas and a ticket. After Sweden, every country was the same for me," he confided.

In Indonesia, Naseer was still unsure of his final destination. With 30 other asylum seekers he stayed in a hotel. All the while his precious supply of cash was

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dwindling away.

Whilst there, Naseer heard there was a way to get to Australia by water. He met with a people smuggler and for \$US2,000 secured a route to Australia.

Their first attempt was unsuccessful, so they tried again.

With 280 other asylum seekers, mostly from Iraq and Afghanistan, Naseer boarded a large, aging fishing boat and headed for Australia's coastline. Carefully circumventing the legal routes, they made for the Indian Ocean.

After a few hours some passengers noticed the boat appeared to be having engine problems, but no one thought it serious and they continued on their journey. It wasn't until they hit the open seas that they realised this could be their final hour.

Once on the Indian Ocean a cyclone hit. The engine stopped. The boat began to take in water. A huge wave crashed over the craft and they lost the steering wheel.

They turned to the captain but he was hysterical, crying and tearing at his hair. It was pandemonium. Everyone on board was throwing up, sick from the violent motion of the vessel as it dipped further and further into the blackness of the ocean. The anchor made a loud, clanking sound as it hit the side of the boat in a steady and sinister rhythm.

Naseer felt he would die. He decided that should he reach land, any land, that's where he would stay.

Naseer was to live. The boat's engine came back to life. A mechanic on board managed to fix it. The waves of the cyclone carried the boat along until they reached an unknown island. It was Indonesia.

Although he'd sworn he wouldn't, Naseer resolved to attempt the journey once more. This time they would head for Ashmore reef. Finally they would reach their destination.

"Some things I will never forget. Most of us on the boat were Shiites. I found out later that one of the men was a Mandaen, escaping persecution in Iraq. Whilst on board he pretended to pray, just like Shiites. It was out of fear. It was because

of us. I felt awful. I felt lots of empathy for him," Naseer explained.

"Our people smuggler was a very good man. He could have ripped us off but he was a fair and good man.

"Another event that struck me immensely on the way to Australia. The captain knew he would be imprisoned for three to five years when he came to Australia but he did it anyway. He had a sick son and he needed the money. He couldn't get it through normal fishing. He knew he would go to gaol but he did it for his sick child.

"His situation got me thinking. I was not in the best shape myself, taking a journey to the unknown. Even though I was in a very bad situation, I was probably better than him. In Iran we didn't have to worry about medical care. Health care was free. Charities would provide for people in Iran. We were very lucky.

"When we finished I tried to collect all our Indonesian money to give to the smuggler but I don't think it ever got to him. The navy said we couldn't do it," he said.

Arriving on Christmas Island in November 1999 the 380 men, women and children were taken by Australian Navy Personnel who flew them to Curtain Detention Centre.

"I thought there would be camps. We expected we wouldn't go to cities until our visas were processed. But we never thought of a detention centre in the way we faced it," Naseer described. We felt relieved once we'd reached Australia. We had reached our destination. We felt a huge sense of safety. In Indonesia we were scared our visas would expire and something terrible would happen. I was very surprised to be taken to Curtain. It was the first time we had concussion with reality. As soon as we reached Curtain it was like a military camp. The guards were very aggressive. They were shouting at us and using F words. They put about 280 of us in tents as they were still building the bunkers. It was boiling hot in Western Australia. We were surrounded by barb wire. Every 100 metres or so there were three or four officers. Before that time

I'd only seen that sort of treatment in the movies. When we woke up in the morning we were shocked. We realised we were in the middle of nowhere.

We saw some Iraqis we knew from Indonesia and tried to say hello but they all shushed us. They were our own people, but the way they said shush, it really felt like a concentration camp, like we would be whipped. Later I found it wasn't as bad as that. I spoke with security later and found out they had orders to treat us as badly as possible."

"Conditions in Curtain were really bad. We had no access to a telephone for four months. Lots of people were worried their families wouldn't know if they were dead or alive. When the first person in Curtain made a phone call about 600 people were in the waiting area for him. As soon as he appeared everyone was cheering and shouting like he was a hero. It was so important the first call. For the two weeks after that, that's all we talked about, how to get a card, the best way to make calls."

"One of the most difficult things in Curtain was the way they kept us in limbo. We had no access to radio, papers, television. No access to the luxury of visits.

"Some people in Curtain would say, 'I just wish they would tell me if I was to be there for four or five years'. It was the uncertainty, you never know.

"It was one of the few times in my life when I felt psychological torture, you can't decide where you are," he said.

When Naseer was first in Curtain, all asylum applications were frozen. No one's claims were being investigated. After a time, the detainees became increasingly frustrated; particularly with the lack of information they were given.

With few options for protest, the asylum seekers went on a hunger strike. For ten days approximately 700 desperate men, women and children refused to eat. But their conditions didn't change. Feeling despondent and hopeless, some of the detainees began to self-harm.

Naseer had been in Curtain eight months when he heard news from Woomera. A friend in detention had an

illegal radio. Over the airwaves they heard that those imprisoned in that centre had escaped.

"The news was like a bomb. It couldn't be contained. In one hour every single person was talking about it, even the children," Naseer explained.

"By midnight, we made the decision that at 6 am, everyone would break out. No one slept. We were all getting our things in order," he said.

At the appointed hour, 1,000 of the 1,200 detainees escaped. Within hours, they were captured by the WA police and returned to Curtain.

"It had one good result. For nine months our applications had not been touched or looked at. Suddenly they started opening cases," Naseer said.

"It's hard for others to understand but until I stepped foot on Australian soil I had never heard of the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). I didn't know I could apply and come here. Lots of Arab people are like this. We heard about it the first time we were interviewed by a case officer. It's difficult for us to know that such a thing exists," he said.

On 15 August 2000 Naseer was released from detention along with 500 others. He was given a temporary protection visa.

"I was very happy, very relieved. There was disbelief as well. We'd been kept in such a desperate way, it took our hopes away.

At first, Naseer worked as a security guard and taxi driver. Although most of his friends from detention were living in Sydney, Naseer moved to Brisbane. At the time, it was the only place he could study at TAFE without incurring fees of \$10,000 or more. He completed a diploma in information technology and a certificate in workplace training and assessment before moving to Sydney in 2002.

Naseer's first qualified job in Sydney was for Work Directions Australia, where he worked as an employment consultant. Breakthrough was his next employer. There he taught job seekers computer skills. At the same time he completed his interpreter qualifications and opened a



private interpreting business.

On 15 September 2004 Naseer was granted permanent residency.

"In the beginning before I was granted a permanent visa I thought I would never be secure. Lots of people on temporary protection visas always said 'Let's see' but I always wanted to do something, study etcetera. That really helped me a lot to deal with pain of insecurity."

"That day was one of the best moments of my life in Australia. It meant so much. It gave me a great sense of joy and happiness, comfort and relief. A lot of brightening, planning for the future."

Asked if he's concerned about discrimination against refugees, Naseer says, "My whole life I've looked at the brighter side. People are enemies of what they don't know. They fear we are illegals, we could be anything. Unfortunately that is how the media pictured us to the Australian public and the government just added fuel to the fire.

"I have a strong belief you need to get out there, let people know. Don't be ashamed. If we don't let people know what and who we are then how can things change?" he said.

Naseer joined STARTTS in June 2006. He is proving an enormous asset to the Personal Support Team. ■

Rebecca Hinchey