

## **Resettlement as a transsexual from the Middle East—reflections on a journey**

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*In this article Manar Al depicts, through personal reflections, the journeys that transgendered people born in the Middle East make as they navigate the resettlement process. By sharing his experiences, he demonstrates difficulties faced in the resettlement process, from lacking UNHCR knowledge of LGBT issues, to language difficulties faced by resettled individuals in host countries. He also discusses the opportunities that resettlement has to offer. Today, living in the United States, Manar is fulfilling his greatest dream: living a normal life, as a normal man, safe from persecution.*

The situation for LGBT persons in the Middle East, especially transsexual individuals, can be critically dangerous. LGBT persons regularly suffer from a long list of discriminatory actions, including rejection by their community, verbal or physical harassment, denial of employment, and poor access to medical treatment. In some cases, LGBT persons may even become the victims of mass killings perpetrated by armed militias that have been known to put LGBT persons at the top of their ‘kill lists’. Together, these factors can leave transsexual individuals with no option but to leave their home countries to seek a safe life elsewhere. However, such a move is often only open to the luckiest of LGBT individuals—many LGBT persons in the Middle East lack the resources to flee overseas or are unaware of how to begin the process of seeking resettlement to a new country.

My story illustrates the challenges faced by transsexual individuals living in the Middle East. I will discuss the difficulties I faced in my home country and the challenges that arose once I embarked on the resettlement process. While outlining challenges, I also aim to emphasise the vast opportunities that resettlement can offer to transsexual individuals; in particular, how resettlement to the United States helped me to realise my dream of living a normal life as a normal man.

### **Growing up as a transsexual in Iraq**

I am a 32-year-old Female to Male transsexual and LGBT activist, born in Iraq. In May 2013 I arrived in the United States as a refugee after I’d spent nine months in Lebanon waiting for UNHCR’s decision on my resettlement case.

I grew up in Baghdad, a warzone that has been ranked as one of the most dangerous places in the world for LGBT individuals to live. During my high school years, I lived through physical conflicts that erupted in the city, and through a huge conflict between my mind and body, unaware of why exactly I felt this conflict. I had no information or resources to explain what I was going through. All I knew was that I wasn’t accepted as I was. I suffered verbal harassment at school, at home, and in the street. Everybody wanted me to be somebody I was not.

When I started college in 2000 I had to make a decision: dress as a male and deal with endless abuse, or dress as a female to please everybody around me. The latter is exactly what I did. I kept a low profile, dressing as a woman and hiding my real identity. The abuse stopped, but I would avoid looking at myself in the mirror. I hated what I had to be and felt unbearable humiliation. I tolerated this internal struggle because I had dreams for the future that could only be fulfilled if I completed my education.

In 2008, aged 26, I learned for the very first time about gender identity disorder while watching a TV show. I cried for hours because I knew that I was not alone and knew that there was a future for me. However, I was unable to seek any medial help in Baghdad for fear of being caught and tortured by local militia or police forces. My only resource was the Internet. I learned that I needed to work hard to save money to start my ‘freedom’ project.

### **Escalating violence and flight to Lebanon**

In March 2012 a campaign of brutal attacks against LGBT individuals broke out in Baghdad. With the help of the local army, unknown armed militia began to publicly attack and kill LGBT individuals. This was meant to send a warning to others. The community in Baghdad supported these acts, rejecting anything unusual. The pressure was high and, living in fear, I started to seek help from organisations outside Iraq. In 30 days I sent 30 emails to NGOs, embassies, the UN, and other bodies. Eventually, I received a response from the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), a US-based NGO. They said, ‘Yes, we can help you. But you have to make a tough decision. You need to leave your country and apply from a nearby country to UNHCR for resettlement. We will guide you through the resettlement process until you arrive safely in the USA.’

In August 2012, with a broken heart, I left my home country, family, and friends. I went to Beirut, Lebanon where I applied to UNHCR for resettlement. In terms of security, living in Lebanon as a refugee was not much different to living in my home country Iraq. As a transsexual, I still hid myself and dressed as a woman, keeping a low profile to protect myself from abuse and harassment.

The process moved quite quickly. However, the lack of knowledge among UNHCR staff about gender identity disorder shocked me. I was asked, ‘What do you mean that you’re a transsexual? Does that mean that you’re a lesbian?’, and ‘What is the difference between gender orientation and sexual orientation?’ Luckily, I was knowledgeable about LGBT and resettlement issues and I was able to answer their questions, making sure that my claim was heard. When I walked into their office I knew that I was meant to be a priority for them, as stated in the UNHCR’s resettlement guidelines.<sup>12</sup> I made sure they knew that I was aware of my rights.

### **Resettlement to the USA**

Nine months later, in May 2013, I was granted resettlement and relocated to the USA. I boarded the airplane as a female and landed in the USA as a male. At the age of 30, for the first time in my life, I was able to dress and act true to myself.

For most transsexuals who are resettled, language is the biggest barrier to accessing

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<sup>12</sup> For more details, see UNHCR’s ‘Resettlement Assessment Tool: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Refugees’ (April 2013): <http://www.unhcr.org/51de6e5f9.pdf>

assistance. Most information regarding resettlement and the gender transition process is in English, leaving many refugees in the dark about the resettlement process and treatment options. Together with a group of other resettled LGBT activists, I have helped to initiate activities on social media to deal with this problem, founding a group called the Arab Trans Association. We support Arab transsexuals by translating and distributing information about the resettlement process, medical treatment, and success stories. Our group also refers potential clients to resettlement NGOs for further assistance, while carrying out activities to spotlight the Arab Trans situation for wider audiences.

In the last two years, living in the US, I have been able to find love, a home, and, most importantly, medical help to start living as a man. Today, I live as a normal man with a small family, in the gorgeous countryside of New York. I no longer worry about the future. I can now achieve my dreams.

*Manar Al is a Project Management Professional (PMP) holder and an MBA student at Edinburgh Business School, Heriot-Watt University. Manar was resettled to the United States in 2013 after fleeing Baghdad, Iraq. He is a vocal advocate for the rights of trans refugees, particularly those from the Middle East, and has consulted with leading refugee advocates on appropriate services for LGBT refugees. Manar is also the founder of the Arab Trans Association ([www.facebook.com/arabtransorg](http://www.facebook.com/arabtransorg)), an online community created to support trans refugees in the Middle East.*