

Iraqi-trained physician Marwan Sweedan



COMING TO AMERICA

REFUGEES ADD COLOR TO BOISE'S GROWING CULTURAL TAPESTRY

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By Greg Stahl Photography by Angie Smith

It was a stunning, sunny spring morning in Boise, Idaho's Liberty Park near the St. Alphonsus medical campus, and two dozen people gathered with the promise of putting roots in the Earth.

A day and a half of rain had just concluded. Tilled soil was wet and stuck to shoes in big, muddy clumps. A group of women wearing bright blue, orange, yellow and purple headscarves sat on the dirt, basking in the strong spring sun and scent of a just-passed storm.

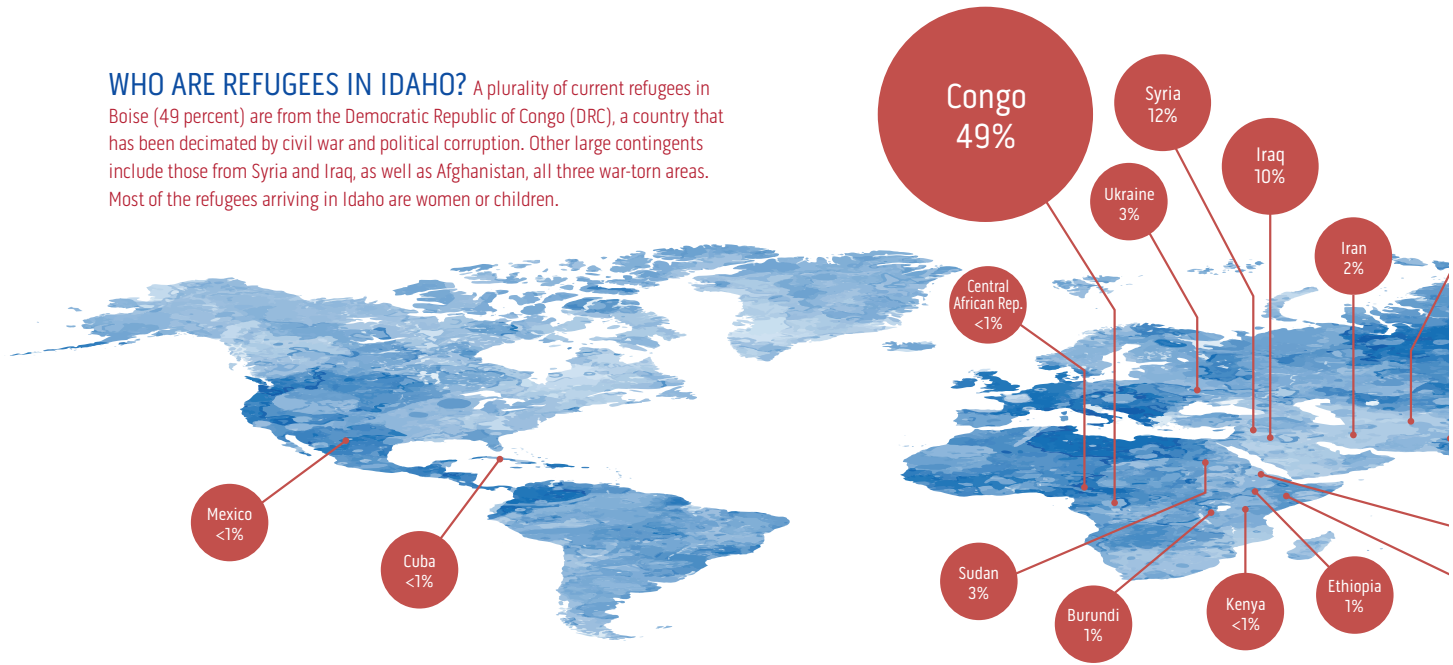
Mahamud Kuso wore a blue button-up shirt and sat near the edge of the field with some other men. He spoke some English, but after several probing questions from a reporter flagged down a friend to translate his native Swahili.

He waved an arm toward the 2 acres of tilled soil where refugees of various nationalities were poking around a grid delineated by orange-painted wood stakes. In his native Kenya, he said, one person would farm an entire area that size, and that would be their main source of income. In Boise, the 3 square-meters that will be allotted to his entire family is comparatively tiny.

"You don't have time to farm that much anyway because you have to work," he said. "Back home there is less work, so you have to focus on farming for your daily bread."

The community garden is an opportunity for refugees from diverse cultures and backgrounds to come together and nurture a sense of place, pride and fraternity. It's also a great way to produce local food. On another level, though, it's a fitting metaphor for refugee resettlement in the Treasure Valley. Families and people of various ethnicities were forced from their homelands and are looking for a place to put roots in the earth.

WHO ARE REFUGEES IN IDAHO? A plurality of current refugees in Boise (49 percent) are from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a country that has been decimated by civil war and political corruption. Other large contingents include those from Syria and Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, all three war-torn areas. Most of the refugees arriving in Idaho are women or children.



A HISTORY OF RESETTLEMENT

By definition a refugee is someone forced to flee their country because of persecution, war or violence. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, a refugee has “well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.” Ethnic, tribal and religious violence and war are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.

Idaho has been a center for refugee resettlement since 1975 when Gov. John Evans established a program to resettle people fleeing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The program was formalized in 1980 when Congress enacted the Refugee Resettlement Act. Since then, Idaho has been part of the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program and has provided a new home for people from distraught nations all over the world.

In the 1980s refugees came to Idaho from Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, Idaho became home to more than 5,000 refugees, more than half of them from Bosnia where civil war and ethnic cleansing forced people to flee. In the 2000s, Idaho has resettled large numbers of people from Iraq, Congo, Burma, Bhutan, Afghanistan, and Somalia. All told, people from more than 60 countries have moved to Idaho as part of the refugee resettlement program. They are store clerks, taxi drivers, and engineers; parents, children, and cousins; and they’re increasingly woven into the fabric of Idaho’s community.

“Boise is a great location for refugee resettlement for several reasons,” said Kara Fink, the outreach and partnership manager for the Idaho Office for Refugees. One is its size. It’s a comfortable place to learn to get around and find the resources people need for day-to-day living. It’s also very safe, which is probably the most important quality people seek when fleeing persecution or war.

“And people in Boise are just really welcoming and friendly,” Fink said. “The outpouring of support for refugee resettlement has grown a lot.”

While support may be on the rise in Boise and Twin Falls, the two Idaho cities where refugees are placed, attitudes statewide are divided. According to a January 2017 public policy survey by Boise State University (BSU), Idahoans are almost evenly split about refugee resettlement. Of the 1,000 Idahoans who participated, 51.1 percent favor the program while 43.8 percent oppose it. Those who oppose it, however, “feel very strongly about the matter.”

In general, younger Idahoans view resettlement more favorably. However, across all age groups of Idahoans, 48.8 percent believe refugees are a burden on Idaho’s economy, while 38.8 percent view them as a benefit. The survey also reported that a vast majority of Idahoans who have actually met refugees—for the most part people who live in Boise and Twin Falls—had more favorable views.

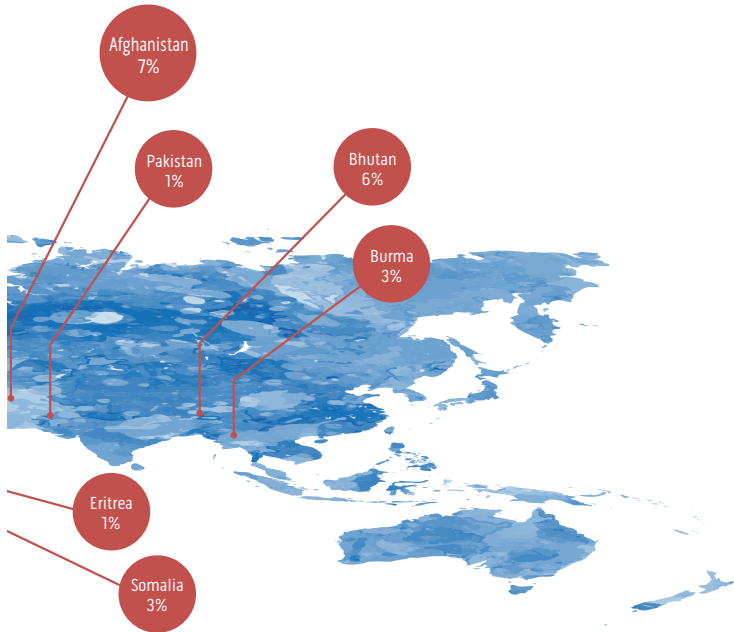
“In sum, there appears to be slightly more support for refugee resettlement in Idaho than opposition, but a good deal of nuance lies beneath the surface of this attitude,” according to the report.

THE PATH TO BOISE

Fleeing one’s homeland and suddenly arriving in the United States can be challenging for a number of reasons. Many refugees don’t speak English. Most experience culture shock. All are looking for jobs, and all are fleeing circumstances that have caused a certain degree of unease, if not outright fear and panic.

“The United States is one of the places we don’t have a clear picture about because in Iraq during Sadaam Hussein’s time it was kind of taboo to talk about the United States,” said Marwan Sweedan, an Iraqi doctor who fled his country after assisting Coalition forces in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq war. “The only thing we know about the United States is through Hollywood, the movies, and TV shows. And, to be honest, they don’t do a great job of promoting American views, values, and lifestyle. And, of course, the Iraqi media was telling us what they wanted us to hear.”

Sweedan relayed the story of his arrival in the United



States. His plane landed on August 12, 2008, around 10 p.m. in San Jose, California. He thought somebody from the local resettlement agency would pick him up, but he was left loitering in the airport wondering what to do—and wondering to some extent how Americans perceived him.

“The airport was closing. It was starting to get toward midnight, and a policeman approached me, and I was kind of frightened,” he said. “You’re in a new country, and you have these images of police in Iraq. I tried to run some English in my mind, and I was reviewing my sentences: ‘good evening,’ ‘how are you,’ and that type of thing. He looked at me, and he started speaking Spanish.”

“We all came on a promise, the same promise: that we’re going to find a great opportunity and if we take it and invest in that opportunity, we can make a great living in the United States.”

— Marwan Sweedan

While amusing, Sweedan’s story keys directly into a truth that refugees of many nationalities and backgrounds face when they arrive, and that is that police in the U.S. aren’t agents of power for a dictator. In general, American police aren’t corrupt, and they don’t take bribes. Boise, in fact, has a police officer whose job it is to help refugees acclimatize to this new reality.

“You meet people who have seen and been through such horrific experiences that no one can even imagine,” said Judi Brawer, who works for a program called Global Talent Idaho, which helps highly-educated refugees like Sweedan land jobs in the U.S. “You can’t sit back and say ‘I empathize

with that person,’ because you can’t physically and mentally imagine what that person has been through.”

Sweedan’s fear of authorities was well founded. In 2006, his father was kidnapped, tortured, and killed by the Iraqi Minister of Interior Affairs, which he said was run by an Iranian militia.

“I worked (as a surgeon) west of Baghdad in Ramadi, which for a time was considered the most dangerous place on Earth,” he said. “Al Qaida, Iraqi army, American army, Iraqi resistance, militia—everybody was there. Finally Al Qaida was able to take over the city, so I had to leave. That was 2006. At that point, I hadn’t thought about going to the United States at all.”

Two years later, after finding asylum in a refugee camp in Jordan and a lengthy vetting process, he landed in California.

MAKING A NEW LIFE

Refugees arriving in the United States aspire to many things. They want to find peace, community and support. But Brawer said the most common aspiration among refugees is to learn English because that is the single most important key to landing a job and earning independence.

“Whether they come here with no education or a bachelor’s degree and a career, the industriousness of refugees is amazing,” Brawer said. “They start businesses, they feed people, have gardens. They want to get back on a career track. I really want to dispel that myth that a refugee comes here and wants to get on welfare. These are the least lazy people I have ever met. They’re working the overnight shift, have families, working two or three jobs.”

Kibrom Milash, a refugee from Eritrea, embodies this notion. When he and his wife arrived in Boise on May 2, 2013, they received help from the local resettlement agency. “They paid our rent for a few months,” he said. “We got food stamps, Medicaid and everything. After a month and two weeks I found a job—three jobs, actually, but I only took two of them. I can’t work three jobs.”

In his first year and a half in Boise, Milash landed jobs as a janitor, summer camp instructor, taxi driver and cook. Then in the fall of 2014 he opened his own restaurant at Boise’s International Market where 16 vendors from around the world sold ethnically diverse food and wares. The market was gutted by fire in September 2015, and Milash moved his business, Kibrom’s Ethiopian and Eritrean Restaurant, to the corner of State and 35th streets. What’s obvious is that it’s become a popular Boise eatery. What’s not so obvious is that Milash got his start by opening a restaurant in a refugee camp called Shimelba in Ethiopia where about 10,000 people, mostly Eritreans, received asylum.

Like other refugees in Boise, Milash’s homeland was torn by war and corruption. He was put in jail for starting a business and forced to go to work for the Eritrean government for six months without pay. Before that, the government had paid him about \$5 per month to work as a math teacher.

“I didn’t have a choice. I had to leave the country,” he said. “So I went back to Ethiopia again, and the government put me in the refugee camp, and I lived there for five years.” He started filling out paperwork to be resettled in the United States in 2010, a process that took three years to complete.



KIBROM'S	
From: Ethiopia and Beyond	
Beef, Lamb & Poultry	
Served with injera & all you can eat dipping or rice	
1. Red Tibs	\$8.50
A mix of tender beef, onion and garlic sauce	
2. White Tibs	\$8.50
A mix of tender beef, onion and garlic sauce	
3. Zigni (Bevew)	\$7.99
Marinated beef in a spicy vegetable sauce and injera	
4. Zilli	\$7.99
Thin sliced beef with onion & tomato sautéed in a buttery red sauce	
5. Darba (Dere)	\$7.99
Tender chicken gizzards simmered in berbere sauce. Served with injera	
6. Alichu with Beef	\$8.50
A delicious combination of beef, potato, cabbage and onion. Served with injera and alicha sauce	
7. Kikali Soup	\$7.99
A hearty and flavorful soup made with potato, carrots, beef or lamb, and alicha sauce	
Vegetables & Lentils	
Served with injera & all you can eat dipping or rice	
8. Black Ales	\$6.99
Black beans, onion & carrots with a hint of berbere. Served with injera	
9. Red Ales	\$6.99
Red lentils, onion & carrots with a hint of alicha sauce	
10. Shiro	\$6.99
A mild beef dish made from ground chickpeas in a delicious berbere beef sauce	
11. Alichu	\$6.99
A delicious combination of potato, cabbage and onion. Served with injera and alicha sauce	
12. Hamuli Kewja	\$7.50
A tender beef dish with potatoes, onion & garlic	
Beyaynetu Combination Plates	
Served with injera & all you can eat dipping or rice	
13. Two Items	\$8.50
14. Three Items	\$9.50
15. Four Items	\$10.50
16. Five Items	\$11.50

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Restaurant owner Kibrom Milash and family

Milash said he's grateful to be where he is and finds the people of Boise very supportive and welcoming. While he's happy, he can't help but look back sometimes.

"There is no one who I grew up with who is in the United States," he said. "I call them sometimes. They're everywhere. Some of them Israel. Some of them Europe. Some of them Canada or Sudan. When you talk with them you feel bad. We wish we could be together again."

Like Milash, Sweedan has an enterprising spirit. He graduated from Baghdad Medical School in 2003, and upon arriving in the United States in 2008 found himself selling hot dogs at a California mall to earn a living. Six years later, after working a variety of odd jobs and three years serving the United States Army as a combat medic, he moved to Boise where he's studying, once again, to become a doctor.

"After a month and two weeks I found a job—three jobs, actually, but I only took two of them."

— Kibrom Milash

The United States is perhaps the only country that doesn't have an easy path for foreign-trained medical doctors to become certified. Sweedan has devoted himself to figuring out the process and has built a support group for other doctors who came to Idaho as refugees. In 2015, he was recognized by the White House with an award called "Champions of Change" for his influence.

"I worked as an interpreter, I worked as an EMT, but the need of going back to get my license and become a doctor and start all over is something that haunts you," he said. "So I wondered how many refugees have the same problem. I reached out to doctors, and we contacted refugees here, and we gathered people from all different countries: from Africa, from Iraq, from Jordan, Somalia, East Europe, from Russia. We started something called Global Talent Idaho-Doc, GTI-Doc."

So far, of the 12 participants, one has found his way into residency and many others into medical-related jobs or paths toward graduate degrees. More success stories are sure to follow. In Iraq, Sweedan worked as a surgeon; he's interested now in infectious diseases and genetics and works as an infection preventionist in the Quality and Safety Department at Saint Alphonsus in Boise.

"You have people coming here who are doctors, engineers, accountants," Brawer said. "They studied and had a successful career. They come here, and they're stocking shelves at Walmart. They're not giving back to the community as much as they would like, or as much as they are able."

A CITY'S COMMITMENT

In January, the Boise City Council made clear the city's commitment to refugees from around the planet when it unanimously passed a resolution reaffirming that the city's welcome mat is out for those fleeing violence and persecution in global conflicts.

"Our city is known as a leader for welcoming all people. We have a responsibility to welcome, speak up for, and stand with all of our residents regardless of where they are from," said Council President Pro Tem Lauren McLean. "Boise is a special place and that is because we strive to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to share their unique contributions within our community."

Boise's resolution—a restatement of a longstanding position—wasn't adopted in a vacuum. It was passed Feb. 1, just a week and a half after the inauguration of President Donald Trump, who on January 27 enacted the first of two executive orders targeting immigration processes and procedures and seeking to ban resettlement from seven predominantly Muslim countries (later reduced to six). It's policy-making that has created worldwide furor.

The politics seem both far away and omnipresent. Life is moving on for Boise's refugees, but the rhetoric from political pundits hovers like a haze over day-to-day life. "I think before the election the stereotypes weren't as prevalent," Brawer said. "I think they've come out of the woodwork since the election. You have such vitriol coming out of people that's completely unfounded. People say things without having ever met a refugee."

The politicization is something new, said Fink, adding that refugee resettlement has had bipartisan support for decades. "We try really hard to stay out of the political side of it," she said. "We just create a more welcoming community and do what we do," which is to provide assistance and support to refugees who are primarily relocated to Boise and Twin Falls in Idaho.

The mixed American perceptions of refugee resettlement are something Sweedan and other refugees acknowledged.

"One of the things I'm helping with: If I can reflect a good picture for the Americans to see I am a good man, they will be more interested to work with a farmer, with an engineer, with a taxi driver, and that will give the refugees the opportunity to flourish," Sweedan said.

THE PROMISE

Four-term Boise Mayor Dave Bieter is the longest serving mayor in the city's 150-year history. He often touts his Basque heritage and Boise's position as one of the most significant centers of Basque people on the planet outside the Basque country of Europe.

"Boise was built by immigrants," he wrote in a recent column. "As the most remote metropolitan area in the lower 48 states, our city has long been a place where people came from around the world to find economic opportunity and build a better life."

This, said Sweedan, holds true for refugees today. Regardless of where they came from or what their backgrounds are, there's a tie that binds them.

"We all came on a promise, the same promise: that we're going to find a great opportunity and if we take it and invest in that opportunity, we can make a great living in the United States, and our children will have a great future," Sweedan said. "So it doesn't matter if you're a doctor, a farmer, a taxi driver. If you're a refugee here, you came on that promise." ■