When Om Firas introduced me, she said, "This is Houda. Her father, her mother and two of her brothers were killed, so she left Iraq with her husband and her daughter."

"Here" is Yarmouk, a large Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Damascus, which is now northern Israel, in 1948. The place does not look like a camp. It is a lively, popular neighborhood with thriving markets and three-story buildings squashed next to one another.

Palestinians were never allowed to return home in Galilee, which is now northern Israel. Now, the place does not look like a camp because it is a popular neighborhood with soaring housing prices.

It was the summer of 2007. I was studying Arabic at the University of Damascus, and I wanted to know about Iraqi refugees in the Syrian capital. I knew there were many. Everybody complained about them: taxi drivers, because traffic had become impossible; women at the market, because tomato prices had increased; and people like me, looking for a place to live and discovering that rents had doubled since the previous year. But I wanted to understand who the Iraqi refugees were and listen to their stories. This is how I discovered Life for Relief and Development (LIFE), one of the few non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in Syria, and Om Firas, LIFE's networker with the Iraqi community in Damascus.

For more information about LIFE's efforts to aid Iraqi refugees, visit: www.lifeusa.org.
Houda is dressed in black. Her face is quiet. “Tell them we don’t have anything against Americans,” she says. “I pray for my children to have an opportunity to study in America, to have a future. I wish they could go to the university there. Tell them also we need support. We don’t have anything here. Nobody is helping us.”

True, they are not receiving any aid except FOM’s financial support and the riches she uses to get food supplies from Iraq. The food bank program set up during the embargo period is one of the rare remnants of Saddam Hussein’s era and an important source of support for Iraqi civilians today. Life, just like other NGOs in Syria, is not officially allowed to work with the Iraqi refugees. The Syrian government attempts to control its activities in order to avoid political instability. Hosting more than 1.5 million refugees in a country of 19 million inhabitants is a real challenge.

Refugees here live with less than zero income.

Syria has been quite welcoming to Iraqi refugees. The Syrian Arab Republic, proud of its Pan-Arab nationalism identity (uniting all Arab countries in one entity), maintained the principle of open borders for all brethren of Arab passports during the Iraqi crisis. Iraqi refugees flooded the borders.

First, it was the elite of the former Baas, or Baath party that ruled in Iraq and reconciled with its Syrian sibling. Then came the upper and middle-class group, who brought skills, new markets and a new economic reality. But most live on很简单．"If you tell me something, I will believe you. If you show it to me, I will believe you. But if you don’t show it to me, how will I believe you?"

Iraqi refugees seek solace in Syria

"To be honest, the situation is very difficult," said Am Al-Ali, the director of the Red Crescent clinic in Jaramanah. "I would say that 80 percent of the refugees here live with less than zero income. They cannot work, and the health situation is catastrophic. We cannot meet all the needs.”

Tourists in Syria

Like everybody, Houda complains about daily life in Syria. “Everything is expensive here,” she says. “We arrived with the savings in dollars we had at the bank and a box of jewels. I sold nearly all my gold to pay the rent.”

Houda and her husband are sharing an apartment with her sister and their cousin. The rent is $500 a month. This amounts to the average monthly wage in Syria, where Iraqis are not allowed to work, even though many of them are highly skilled.

I met an unemployed engineer, educated at a British university, who was formerly the head of the department of telecommunications and engineering at an Iraqi ministry. Some of the Iraqis who came with savings to invest managed to open their own businesses, restaurants, shoe repair shops or underground cloth factories. But most live on savings, daily jobs and remittances from abroad: a cousin who moved to Germany years ago or an uncle who is still employed in Iraq. “We all know this won’t last.”

And then there is the legal status. Iraqis are not officially recognized as refugees in Syria. They are tolerated only as long as their stay is temporary. They are not encouraged to live in Syria, a country still struggling with poverty and not equipped to handle such a sudden increase in its population. So Iraqis fleeing their country enter with a tourist visa.

“We have only a tourist visa; we have to renew it at the border every three months,” Houda says. “It’s a hassle. You have to leave at 5 in the morning, with the kids, drive through the desert in the heat, wait for hours at the border checkpoint to get a stamp, struggle to find a taxi back. And they charge you so much.”

But what bothers her most is the education. Her daughter, Fatima, already missed one year of classes, and she is not registered for the coming school year because there are no spots available. Houda bought an exercise book and she is teaching Fatima English by herself.

Sometimes, Houda’s frustrations have been heard. In September 2007, the Syrian government provided support from the U.N. Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to accommodate 100,000 Iraqi kids in Syrian schools. Things are getting better, but more and more refugees cannot afford to stay any longer in Syria without work, and many fear for their security.

“I don’t want to stay in Syria. I don’t feel safe,” Houda says. “Those who killed my family, they live here. I am afraid to go out. I want to claim asylum in Europe or, in the U.S., anywhere providing my children to have a future they could not reach here.”

But Houda is not the only one to apply at the European, Canadian and American embassies in Damascus. Only the few lucky ones will get a visa to a safer place.

Some are starting now to return to Iraq. Numbers are disputed; it’s a big political issue, determining if the “surge” was really successful in bringing security back to Iraq. The Iraqi Red Crescent reports 46,000 returns, while the Syrian government claims there are more Iraqis crossing the border to Syria than going the opposite direction.

In March 2008, Antonio Guterres, the head of the UNHCR, declared that the circumstances in Iraq were not appropriate for an immediate return of the refugees.

There is no Iraq anymore.

For Houda, return was out of the question. Iraq was gone, anyway. “Going back to Iraq? There is no Iraq anymore. Khilaf (it’s over). When the neighbor kills the neighbor, there is no hope. Life was better during Saddam’s era. Sure, he was a dictator. But at least we had a country. Now we have nothing.”

“My father was killed. My brothers were killed. These dogs (the militias) wanted the house, the cars, the money. We were living in a Shi’ite neighborhood but we never had any problem until the militia came. They wanted us out of here.”

First they kidnapped my mother. In the middle of the street, not even 100 yards away from the police station. Nobody moved. I called for help. No one helped me,” she said. “I went to see the U.S. soldier. He was so young. God protects him; he was just a child. He told me to go away. I went to see the commander, but they didn’t let me approach the Green Zone. Poor soldiers, they were so scared; they could not help us. They were too busy protecting themselves.

“During two weeks we looked for my mother. Then, my father and two of my brothers were captured during the night. One night, a Chelsea nurse found their bodies, my parents’ and my brothers’, in front of the house, thrown like trash.”

Houda hands me pictures. Burnt bodies. She seems too exhausted to cry, and she continues speaking in a soft voice.

“They shot them in the head, they drilled screws in their bodies and they burned them. They are things unheard of. Savagery you could not imagine. And it hurts. You see, a mother is the sweetest thing in the world, when you hear the word ‘mother’ you think about tenderness, love. . . . My father also. He had always been fair and loving. He never beat us. He pushed me to study. He owned his business and was working hard, but thanks God we had all we needed. I went to the university. I graduated in history. I am a history teacher. Ironic, isn’t it? History is good for nothing — catastrophes over and over,” she said.

“Tell them we want peace. Peace. A future.”

[Read contributing writer Yasmine Benagla at features@ thendaily.washington.edu.]