

Chapter 3

ASINJA BADEEL

Iraq and the Yazidis

As a child, I saw the world outside of Iraq as very far away. I thought that living in a safe land, freedom, security and happiness were unachievable for me. How could a young female from a small old minority like Yazidi reach the other side of the world, where all the dreams are possible?

One of the many victims of the chaos and violence in Iraq is Asinja Badeel. Like the stories of so many other Iraqis, hers is multifaceted. It's the story of Iraq's destruction, the pain of war, the genocide against the Yazidi people and deep personal anguish. It is a story of a girl whose imagination allowed her to see outside of her small Iraqi village into a world where people are free. It is a story of a woman with a keen intellect, a compassionate heart and the determination to keep going. It is a story of shattered dreams and courage.

Many will never forget the haunting pictures that permeated the media in early August 2014, of the 50,000 Yazidi people who were trapped by ISIS on Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq. The United States reacted with airstrikes allowing most of the people to be evacuated.

Iraq has been plagued with violence for most of the twenty-first century. The United States' invasion in 2003 and the subsequent fall of Saddam Hussein created a power struggle that has consumed the country. Sectarian violence has resulted in the rise of extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and ushered in an invigorated Kurdish independence movement. These elements coupled with the United

States' military withdrawal created a struggle for power that diminished the government's power and authority. Iraq is a country in turmoil where the chaos and lack of government leadership had led to continued violence. This void enabled ISIS to capture a significant portion of the country, which resulted in the persecution and extermination of minority groups. The attempted destruction of the Yazidi people has been labeled genocide (the only time that term has been used except for Rwanda and Darfur) by the United States and other countries.

The Yazidis are an ethnic and religious minority living predominantly in Iraq and Syria. They are indigenous to Mesopotamia and their religion—Yazidism, which combines elements of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—is one of the oldest religions in the world. The Yazidis and their religion are endogamous, which means that one must be born as a Yazidi; one cannot become a Yazidi by converting to Yazidism. The group has been persecuted for centuries, but until recently, has lived primarily in obscurity. In August 2014, ISIS began a targeted campaign of terror and extermination against the Iraqi Yazidi population. ISIS believes that the Yazidis are “devil worshippers,” so they razed their villages, executed hundreds of Yazidi males, enslaved hundreds of their women, and forced thousands to flee to Mount Sinjar. Once the Yazidis were trapped on Mount Sinjar, the international media devoted significant airtime to their plight until Kurdish Peshmerga forces saved them. It is estimated that over 10,000 Yazidis were killed or kidnapped by ISIS in the month of August 2014. Thousands of Yazidis have been killed or enslaved since then, and the genocide against them continues to be perpetrated by ISIS.

In this chapter about Asinja and her journey one sees the unfolding of a life from a village in Iraq to Houston, Texas. Sitting with her in her office, it is clear that Asinja is a determined woman who wants to continue to pursue her learning and contribute to life in her new country. She also remains passionately committed to the plight of the Yazidi people.

The Imaginary Girl

My grandfather would tell us stories. I keep them in my mind because forgetting what happened is exactly what they want— for us to disappear completely.

Asinja's journey began in the small village of Bashiqa on the Ninawa Plain in northern Iraq, a beautiful region filled with olive trees and green valleys, with Sinjar Mountain in the distance. From birth, her grandfather, Badeel, was a vital force in her life. It was he who rejected traditional Yazidi names for her, and instead gave her the name Asinja, after a Norse goddess of wisdom and love.

One of eight children, Asinja was raised in a small, two-bedroom house where she and her four brothers and three sisters shared a single room. Her father, Nawaf, was a dentist and her mother, Ghazala, took care of the children and household, and harvested and sold olives and chamomile. But it was her grandfather, a religious leader and successful businessman, who filled Asinja with the pride, curiosity and courage that would sustain her throughout her life.

At the core of her family life was their Yazidi identity. Yazidis are considered a Kurdish-speaking ethno-religious minority. However in Bashiqa the language was Arabic. Badeel taught Asinja about Yazidi history, culture and way of life as well as about the massacres they endured over the centuries. Monotheists who believe in the power of nature and the goodness of people, they would say five daily prayers, asking for peace and

safety, focusing on the oneness of nature, particularly the sun, which they view as the source of energy for the world and ultimate truth. Twice a year, Yazidis from all over gathered in nearby Lalish, home to the holiest temple of their faith.

But because of the violent history of Sunni Muslim persecution against the Yazidis, Asinja's parents didn't want her to make her identity known to people outside of the community.

The Muslims consider us infidels and accuse us of not worshiping God. They killed us many times through history and every time they destroyed our culture, our temples and our books. They killed our most educated people, so that that we didn't want to talk about our religion anymore. My mother told me to say I am Yazidi, but nothing more. My grandfather said not to write anything down because if we document what we are worshiping, they will kill us for sure.

That is why Yazidi women and men are not allowed to marry from another religion. If you marry a Yazidi man who was born as a Yazidi, our blood will continue.

As a young child, Asinja attended the public elementary school, where she excelled. Eager to learn, she was often named *qutwat al Saaf*, the role model, with the best grades and the most respect of her classmates.

As she grew up, she began to understand the damage inflicted on the people of Iraq by Saddam Hussein.

We all lived in fear of him and what he might do at any time. He kept the Iraqi people isolated from the world. Anyone who dissented was killed. But at the time I was a kid learning

English and watching Oprah because she talked and I just listened and I loved the topics that she was talking about. Then when I reached high school, my father thought that I was ready to read books that he was reading. I had three or four books in English. The first I read was Gone with the Wind. And I read it again in Arabic because I was worried I missed something. Then Love in the Time of Cholera by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I read that one four times.

Marquez transformed me from the reality of my life to his story. There were a lot of times that I didn't like this life, in this place where I was so limited, not like the Western girls my age who were traveling, doing a lot of things that I couldn't do. I saw a lot of barriers in my life, so I watched movies, like Rain Man, and learned English, read books and tried to isolate myself from the life in Bashiqa and just be part of this Western life. I wanted to educate myself about the Western world and the only window we had was through art and movies.

That's why they called me The Imaginary Girl.

I talked a lot about what I imagined about the other side of the world. But everyone told me that Saddam would never let us travel to United States. I was told that the only place I would be is in Bashiqa because I have to marry a Yazidi man. And my education has to be within this border, too. Though my father supported my desire to attend college, my mom didn't think I would be allowed to go to the University of Mosul. Very few girls were able to, and it was only because they had family there. For most Yazidi girls, there was high school and that's it. So you stay in the village and you think about marriage. For two reasons. The woman's place is only in the house, doing the house chores and all of that. The other reason is because you are Yazidi and if you went to a Muslim city, it would be dangerous. When I

graduated from high school, in 2000, my mom and oldest brother told me that I could not go to Mosul because it was not safe and we couldn't afford it.

The Terror of Saddam

When Asinja was still a child, in the early 1990s, she would listen to her father and his friends talk about Saddam with hatred and fear. Military service was mandatory for Iraqi men. But Asinja's father didn't want to serve Saddam, so he hadn't joined the army during the war with Iran and now they were after him.

If a man did not serve in the army or special forces, Saddam's men would come after the woman and kids and they came a lot to our house. It was a terrifying experience. I remember one time they came to Bashiqa and took many families to our mountain and they buried them alive because their men hadn't served.

Sometimes Saddam's guards would go to the University of Mosul, and other areas of northern Ninewa, because it was known that they have the most beautiful women there. They would grab the women by force and rape them.

My mother and I would go to the forest to collect wood to make bread. One day when we returned to find Saddam's police attacking our house, flipping chairs, throwing clothes.

They were looking for my dad and cousins. I saw my cousin, Zuhair, running away from them to the forest. They shot at him with guns, but they couldn't catch him.

But they got my dad. He was in his pajamas. They wanted my oldest brother too. My mom begged them, "He's just a student and he's not old enough for the army." They threw my brother down and they took my dad. They put him in a car and took him to jail.

The facility was Badush jail, where they put the north people, as they called us. Many of the men there died. We don't know if they killed themselves or if the soldiers killed them. There was torture. Since no international people were coming to see this jail, no one knew about it, so they could do anything they wanted to do.

Two years later, Saddam, offered Alafo alaam, a general forgiveness for all prisoners. I think because it was the end of the war and Iraq had won, he was celebrating. It was the evening when my dad came home. My mom didn't know he was coming. He just entered the house and looked so old and tired. He was hungry. And he was so depressed that he couldn't work for a very long time after, putting my mom under a lot of pressure.

The Iran war, the Kuwait war, the U.S. war, all took a lot from my dreams, but they could not take away my hope. That hope was stronger than the Iraqi dictator, brighter than the flames of the bombings and explosions, and clearer than the smoke that darkened the skies of Baghdad.

Anyone Killed for Any Reason

Asinja met her future husband, Saher, right after high school. Born and raised in Baghdad, he came to Bashiqa to purchase products including olives from Asinja's mom for his father's business. As Saher and Asinja got to know each other, she made it clear that

pursuing her studies was critical to her. He supported her dreams of higher education, like her father. The parents then met to “arrange the marriage.”

Asinja and Saher were married in 2001. They moved to Baghdad to start their life together, living with his parents. Asinja was inspired by the city, its energy and people, and felt there was much opportunity for her. She tried to enroll in the university but didn't have access to her high school transcripts or records. By the time she had everything in order she learned she was pregnant.

That is life in Iraq – marriage and then children right away. I felt like I kept postponing my dreams. When I became pregnant, I was sick for months. But when my son came I was so happy and I started to love the time that I was spending with him. We decided I could go study while I was living with my mother-in-law who could take care of the baby while I was in school.

Then suddenly the war, this time with the United States, and things started to get darker. In 2003, they told us to move from Baghdad because it had become too dangerous. The only safe place was Bashiqa. It was 3:00am on March 18th, just the day before my birthday, and in two cars, with my husband's family, we fled from Baghdad. It was a six-hour drive to Bashiqa. We could hear the fighter jets. The United States had a center in Turkey and we were very close. We heard when they came and hit Mosul.

After 45 days, we saw the United States army. They came in their big trucks to the village and I remember that the people welcomed them. The kids were running after them. They were giving candies to the kids. They told us there would be a new face for Iraq. We will

know freedom. We will be able to travel. We will be able to have a lot of Western products, like the internet, phones, newspapers, TV news.

The people were ecstatic that the dictator was out of power and the country they loved could be rebuilt. A few months later, Asinja, Saher, and the baby returned with his family to Baghdad. But life was not what they had expected.

Baghdad had been torn apart. There was no job for my husband. The university was not open. We were supported by my in-laws. No more Hussein, but no one knew what to do.

After nearly a year, her husband landed a job with an American security company. They now had some money and could start to live again. In 2004, Asinja was pregnant with their second child, who was born in 2005. She decided to start school when it reopened in the fall.

That dream was, once again, shattered.

Baghdad again was in total chaos, buildings destroyed, bodies everywhere. Militias were fighting, there was terrible conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims, and there was no law or order.

They killed everyone. Every day there were bombings. We actually were getting used to life with dead bodies lying on the streets. Anyone could be killed for any reason.

Then my husband received a frightening warning— a bullet wrapped in a piece of paper with his name and a simple message. You will be killed. They saw any Iraqi working with American companies as a traitor. And the fact that he was Yazidi made it even more dangerous.

But my husband didn't stop working because we really needed the income. My father had an idea. He suggested that I take a very quick course to be a teacher, which I did and was soon hired as a teacher. My husband started looking for another job, but couldn't find one. The threats continued. My daughter was born in 2005 and I was worried our life was going to be worse.

Baghdad was just a place for dead bodies.

We couldn't go to stores. One minute everything's okay, and then the whole place is bombed and people are dying. The people that we shopped from, our friends, they would disappear. Death started to be normal. I don't want to say this but it was not shocking us to know that 500 died in the shopping center or there's this car with a bomb here in this street or that street and how close it was to us. Iraqis started to adjust to these situations.

But then one night a big 18-wheeler truck carrying a huge bomb came to the place where my husband worked. The target was the Americans. They were very close to the gate when it exploded. I had been sleeping but the explosion shook the windows in my room, the noise unimaginable.

For part of one agonizing day, Asinja didn't know whether her husband was dead or alive after the bomb killed many of his friends. She waited for news. Finally she learned that Saher was alive, but knew they had to flee Iraq if they were to survive. However, Asinja and the children didn't have passports. Saher had a passport, so he went, leaving Asinja and the kids behind. Every day was a struggle for Asinja, who did her best to protect her children and give them a sense of security and love, while waiting for word from Saher.

In Ankara, Saher learned about international law protecting refugees. He qualified because he was Yazidi fleeing genocide in Iraq. However, a file for refugee status couldn't be opened until Asinja and his children were with him. He received a temporary visa to remain in Turkey and landed a job working illegally in a clothing factory, making half of what a Turkish citizen earned.

The real nightmare now began for Asinja.

Getting Out Alive

With the help of family and friends and my salary, we gave money to my brother-in-law to get passports for us. They were full of mistakes, like our names were spelled wrong, the dates of birth were wrong. But we could use them. Iraq is not like here. Now, the challenge started, how to get to the airport. My husband's friend who worked at the Baghdad International Airport booked a flight for us for the middle of August.

We prepared, got the luggage and got my kids prepared and said goodbye, crying. We left in the car with the same friend of my husband who worked in the airport. I put the kids in the back of the car and I sat in front. He drove a little bit and then he told me, "I have to tell you something, the road is very dangerous. We might be attacked. Try to stay calm and when I say lie down, get down." My eyes filled with tears.

I was already sad because I left Baghdad. I hadn't had a chance to say goodbye to my parents. So I just looked back at my kids, and I held their hands. I thought, I'm putting my kids

in this situation, but I cannot go back. I was so frightened and confused. I was seeing death very close.

I was scared for my kids, so I told them we're going to play a game. It's a game called hiding. I said, "When I say hide, we all go down in the car and hide ourselves on the floor, and when I say that's it, we can just get back up." They laughed, and we began to play.

But the driver started to sweat, his skin so pale, and he said, "Asinja, they're here," and suddenly there was shooting from everywhere. Cars were in front of us and behind and there was nowhere to go.

"Now!" I said to my kids. And we got all down. Even the driver, who was holding the steering wheel, was also hiding. I was thinking if we're not going to get killed with their guns, we will get killed in a car accident. My daughter was so scared of the sound of the bullets, she started to cry. My son was trying to hold it together. "No," he told her, "this is a game we are playing."

But the driver knew we couldn't make it. When he had the opportunity he turned around because even if we got through this, he said, on the road ahead there were more. He took us back to our home.

We missed the flight, and I called my husband. He said, "We have to find a way," so he talked to his friend about the best day and time to leave. So we tried it again, we got new tickets, we headed to the airport and the same scenario happened. Again.

We went back, but I was not emptying my bags. There had to be a way. The driver came back to my house, and told of his plan to take us very early in the morning. My husband's family was warning us against it. "You'll be a clear target. You'll be the only car in the street." But the driver was sure. He issued another set of tickets and picked us up at 4:00am. And that time, we passed safely. There was no attack. I could not have been more grateful to my husband's friend.

But I was very sad to leave Iraq. I was worried about the future in Istanbul. I didn't even get excited about seeing my husband because my worries and fears were so big. Bigger than me.

Once inside the small terminal, Asinja cried uncontrollably. Sad about fleeing Iraq and facing an uncertain future in Turkey, Asinja was leaving her family and friends behind. She had loved Baghdad from the moment she moved there. It represented hope. Yet the city she loved had been transformed into something much uglier.

A New Word, A New World

As we landed on September 15, 2007, I could see Istanbul. There were orange buildings and the sea, and as the plane lowered I could see people walking on the shore. There were ships and boats and I loved that, those things that made it so different from Iraq. And one thing I noticed, the sky was so clear. There was no dust like in Iraq. The sky was blue and the view was like the pictures we had seen on calendars of places we thought we'd never go.

My husband met us at the airport with a taxi. On the drive to his apartment I noticed that even the smell of the streets was different. They say because of the bombs and the war after war, the weather in Iraq and the environment is not clear. Now I knew what they meant.

After the ecstasy of the moment the reality of the challenges ahead took root. Following protocol, they registered with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees. Their file was expedited as they were the only Yazidi family in Istanbul. During the past few months, two Yazidi villages near her home village had been attacked and many people were killed.

A U.N. official explained that Asinja and her family qualified as refugees—a word that Asinja had never heard before.

I never thought that I would be a refugee. I thought I would travel just to see the world like the girls I saw in the movies. Maybe I'd get a scholarship studying at a university. My dreams were so big that I was thinking about Harvard. But to enter as a refugee, instead, I didn't understand what I was being told. I'd been discriminated against because of my religion and thought maybe this was yet another way to label me a Yazidi. So I asked about going to Australia or Germany where there were many Yazidi families. The man said the United States might work since my husband had had a job with Americans. I didn't let myself get too excited, as I had been disappointed before.

They spent months in Istanbul. Asinja didn't speak Turkish or know where to go to complete even the most basic tasks. She also didn't know what to do with their children. In

their apartment, she sat near a window, wishing she might hear Arabic. Her husband worked long hours. Asinja felt isolated and depressed.

But one day, as I cooked lunch for the kids, through the open window I heard people speaking Arabic. They were a Christian couple with a baby girl, and they had just arrived from Baghdad, who rented the apartment under ours.

Soon after, as I was shopping, I met a family from Bashiqqa, and we become friends. They treated me like their daughter.

Still, the nine months we waited was the longest in my life, though it was considered a fast case there. We met with the International Catholic Migration Commission. To obtain refugee status we needed to get medical check-ups and a security check. Then we waited. There was no timetable. You just wait until they contact you.

Finally, Asinja and her family were given a travel date to the U.S. for May 25, 2008. But then their trip was cancelled. According to their official documentation, they were supposed to be living in the Turkish city of Tokat, and it was discovered that they had stayed in Istanbul. Clearly, they had not paid the right bribe to the right official.

Saher had to quit his job, they had to move out of their apartment, and following a 13-hour bus ride to Tokat they immediately registered and paid the Turkish “tax” required to leave the country. After some time in Tokat, they returned to Istanbul with no apartment or job awaiting them, so they stayed with a Syrian family that was also waiting for a flight. Finally, another call: their departure date would be June 25, 2008, nearly a year after Asinja had arrived in Turkey.

We went to a culture orientation meeting and they asked us if we knew someone in United States. So I told them we didn't. They told us that if you know someone, we can take you to that place, but if you don't know, we're going to pick the place for you. So they picked Houston. We asked, "Where is Houston?" They said, "Houston is in Texas, a state in the south."

Our Iraqi friends made fun of us. "Oh, you're going to live with horses and cows. We see you having these big hats and you will be like cowboys."

Then my husband said, "Anywhere is better than Baghdad, and it's better than Istanbul. I just want to be stable. It's been years. We are on our way."

So I was ready. I called my parents. I remember I joking with my dad, "You know what? I will see Tom Cruise very soon." He said, "You will be successful and you will be happy. Your life is going to change. The things that we could not give to you when you were in Bashiqa, you will have for sure."

On their departure day, the International Organization of Migration gave them a sealed envelope with all their papers and strict instructions not to open it. At the airport they remained terrified. It was only after they crossed the red line at passport control and showed their papers did they finally feel relief.

While at the airport Asinja met a group of American women traveling together. They were welcoming and engaged her in conversation over coffee.

They were so friendly, they accepted us, and they really didn't care about what we believed, what's our color, where we're from. And when I saw that they are women who travel

together once a year without their husbands and have fun, I realized that could be my life and my daughter's life. As a woman in the U.S. one has choice and freedom.

From Istanbul they flew to Frankfurt, Germany, and then to New York City,

As we were landing in New York, the pilot started to do a tour. We saw the freedom statue. I couldn't believe that I was seeing it because it seemed so far when I was in Bashiq. You know, when you dream of a place a lot, you just feel like it's in your imagination, it doesn't really exist because it's so far, it's so impossible to see. Now it became a symbol of my happiness, actually. My freedom. I looked at it really as an opportunity for magic.

They finally arrived at their new home in Houston, where they were being resettled. Representatives from Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston took them to a one-bedroom apartment. On June 26, 2008, a new life began for Asinja and her family.

Making a Life

Our apartment had tables, chairs, a bed and blankets for us, for each of my kids. There was a lot of food in the kitchen, pots, everything we needed was there for us. We were on the second floor facing the pool. It was such a beautiful view.

It didn't take the couple long to meet other refugees from Iraq and learn how to navigate a new world. Like all refugees they had I-94 status, which allowed them to work

and apply for a Social Security number. Only upon receipt of the number could they apply for official ID cards. Asinja got her Green Card in 2009, after a year in America. She soon enrolled in an English course where she had been accepted at the highest level. Her husband was in the most basic level. They each went for four hours a day so they could take turns with the kids.

One day a visitor came from the local church. Her name was Anne and she said she was just a church member trying to find refugees to listen to them, to help them. I told her about my journey, and we cried together. And she hugged me, she prayed for me. And I told her the part that was really hurting me because I didn't had a chance to say goodbye to my parents because of the war. So she said if you allow me, I will be your mom or your grandma here.

Anne taught Asinja about the public bus system, the schools and the community colleges where Asinja might be able to start her studies. It wasn't easy learning how to navigate American bureaucracy and paperwork. But with Anne as her guide, Asinja was an outstanding student.

She took the proficiency exam at the local community college, where she flourished in English but needed to take three remedial math classes. While other refugees received financial aid Asinja was told she wasn't eligible. Asinja remained tenacious and resilient. Anne told her about a course in first aid and CPR training, and that there was a need for people with such a background. Asinja and Saher got jobs but there was so much yet to do and figure out: enrolling the children in school, getting a driver's license, preparing a resume and getting into community college.

After several months, Asinja enrolled in Samuel Houston Community College, where financial aid officials told her she was fully qualified. So, after many years of waiting, she finally resumed her studies and entered community college in 2009. She was working full time, taking care of her children and excelling in school. She quickly moved from two to five classes a semester and accomplished her goal of straight A's. One of the greatest days of her life was when she received her Associate's Degree in 2012.

Through these years, I was helping every refugee who I met. I told Interfaith that I wanted to do the same thing they did for me, and help as much as I can. So I volunteered with Interfaith Ministries Alliance, Catholic charities, YMCA, translating, interpreting, doing food stamp application, taking people to social security offices, teaching new refugees. When you have dreams and goals inside you for a long time, it really becomes like a fuel that is hidden for the right opportunity. And once this opportunity comes, then you can distribute this fuel all around yourself to others.

In the spring of 2013 she started part-time studies at the University of Houston where she had a scholarship to pursue petroleum engineering. However, in early August the plight of the Yazidi people became known to the world. Terrifying pictures of 50,000 Yazidis trapped by ISIS on Mount Sinjar dominated the news. Fortunately, her parents and most of the villagers had managed to flee before the devastation.

They burned our house, burned all the trees, destroyed all of Bashiqa,. I don't know how a person, a human, can do all this. My family didn't take anything with them. Hearing

their stories, I knew we had to raise the awareness. So I chose to leave college and fight for my people. We started fundraising, raising awareness.

Asinja returned to Iraq in early 2015. She sat with the victims and listened to their painful stories. Except for her brother, who had come to Houston with his wife, her entire family was in an Iraqi refugee camp. The years of violence had taken a toll on her parents who were both ill. She saw friends who had lived so peacefully in Bashiqa, now victims of terror that had torn their lives apart.

In 2014, an international organization called Yazda was formed to bring attention to the plight of the Yazidis and Christian minorities in Iraq. During her visit Asinja went to the Yazda Center in Dohuk, in Iraqi Kurdistan, to hear stories of the women and girls raped by Islamic State members. Asinja comforted the victims as she had been one of them. The trip was profoundly painful. But it also helped Asinja realize that her life's calling was to help the most vulnerable on earth—persecuted minorities and refugees. She wrote several articles and upon her return, changed her major to business administration to acquire the skills needed for organizational work. She graduated in 2017 and intended to start an MBA program in management and leadership in 2018. Asinja works fulltime as a case manager at the same interfaith organization that helped resettle her. She also taught Arabic in the public schools, for which she was recognized by the mayor of Houston.

Asinja met the most noted spokesperson for the plight of the Yazidis, Nadia Murad, when she was in Houston, and they formed a deep bond. She had been held captive for three years, and was tortured and raped before managing to escape. She had spoken to the U.N. and was appointed the first Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of

Human Trafficking for the United Nations. Asinja later traveled with Nadia to Germany to help translate and work with her as Nadia finished her memoir, "The Last Girl." Asinja also went to England with her to meet with her attorney, Amal Clooney, and was thrilled to get to meet Amal's husband, George. This relationship with Nadia has been very important in shaping her work to educate people about the Yazidis, their traditions, and the genocide they suffered.

Asinja and her husband now own their own home in Houston and work full time. Their children are flourishing in public school.

I put them into this environment that I was always dreaming of, seeing my children have opportunities, doing well at school, having fun, and participating. My daughter sings a lot in the choir and they invited her to sing the national anthem. And my son is playing a cello. I'm glad I made the decision to get into that taxi again on that road in the middle of the night.

I am proud to be an American. But I will never stop dreaming and remembering my village, my mother and my neighborhood friends. When I walk in Houston in the fall, I smell Bashiqqa and feel overflowing pride knowing that I'm setting a strong example of determination and inspiration for Yazidi women everywhere.