

. . .live in Iraq

By Sammar Abdulmuttalib

Sammar Abdulmuttalib is one of the inaugural group of six students from the Middle East selected to study at the University through a U.S. Department of State initiative known as the PLUS program, "Partnerships for Learning Undergraduate Study Program."

Until August 2006, the 21-year-old had never lived anywhere but Al Basra in southeastern Iraq. She flew first to Washington, D.C., and then on to Bozeman, Mont., where she honed her English speaking skills at Montana State University. A month later, Abdulmuttalib traveled to Reno to complete the final two years of her undergraduate studies in English literature and speech communications. The daughter of a Sunni father and Shi'ite mother, she lived through the first years of the increasingly violent civil war following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the downfall of dictator Saddam Hussein. Saddam had been in power since 1979.



Photo by Susan Bender

Sammar Abdulmuttalib braved the uncertainty of war on many occasions while living in Al Basra in southeastern Iraq. Here she is pictured at Lake Tahoe in September 2006, experiencing happier times shortly after she arrived in the United States.

When Saddam was in government, we studied more about him and his party. I didn't get involved in his party because everyone had to be in the approved Iraqi party. My dad refused. It was a problem and they were telling me, "You will not get in college if you don't join the party."

I miss peace. I miss security in Iraq. I think that's what everyone would say. I don't think there will be peace soon, but I hope so. It needs time.

Before the war, I was in high school. But after the war, it was more scary. Unless it was for school, I didn't go out. We started school at 8:30 a.m., so I had to be there at 7:30. I had a driver for me and other friends. In Basra, it's a lot different than Baghdad. It's safer, but it's still not really safe.

We have sects in Iraq and you would feel really scared if somebody would follow you. Then there would be the fighting between the local people in the sects and the British troops. It's not like it happens on an everyday basis, it's just once in a while. It's not like Baghdad.

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There was a bombing at a police station a couple of blocks away from my home one

school day in my neighborhood. There was a bus full of girls...students...they were going to school. They were passing by and a lot of girls died and were injured. I knew one girl who had a sister on the bus. It was in winter 2005, when I was in college at the University of Basrah.*

I was preparing to go to school that day. I felt really scared to go out, but what could I do, you know?

I actually support the war. I'm different. Because during Saddam's regime, we suffered a lot. Maybe not my family, but other families. Every time I hear people say, "The war is not good." But this is the only choice. What are the other options?

In Iraq, we talk a lot about politics and religion. My dad is Sunni and my mom is Shi'ite, so I'm in the middle. I don't really care about the different sects because we are in the same Muslim religion, so when the groups start fighting, I try not to get involved.

It starts with people. They have to understand that we are all in the same religion, have the same book, the Koran. So they should accept each other, even if they are from different sects. Everyone wants to get in the government and that's why you see the fighting.



When I was going to college in Iraq, I listened to pretty much everything in English, especially the American accents. I tried to improve my performance in the language. I didn't have English-speaking people to talk to, but I listened to American music on TV.

Before the war we weren't allowed to have satellite, but after the war we had American programs on Arabic channels. The programs I liked were *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Dr. Phil*.

After I knew that I was coming to the United States, I thought that everyone would be friendly. I wasn't really worried. Every time that other students asked me, "Where are you from,?" I'd say, "I'm from Iraq." Then they started asking me questions. The most common question was, "How did you get here?" They don't see a lot of Iraqis.

* For historic reasons the final -h is retained on Basrah in the name of the university. The name Al-Basrah in Arabic means "the over watching" or "the seeing everything."

