

No more fear



New American citizen Sara Abdulrasool holds her naturalization papers on Friday. She stands between her mother, Zainab, and her father, Zaid. Sara, a junior at Temple, hopes to work for the U.N. STU BYKOFSKY / DAILY NEWS STAFF

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HER WORST childhood memory was of dogs eating dead bodies in the streets of her native Baghdad, Sara Abdulrasool tells me.

Her worst childhood feeling was of being unsafe, subject to random car bombings or specific death threats from sectarian militias.

Because of the sectarian violence, she prefers to identify herself as an "Iraqi Muslim," rather than either Shia or Sunni.

As of Friday, she can identify herself as "an Iraqi-*American* Muslim" because she was one of 48 people from 24 countries to receive citizenship papers during a naturalization ceremony at the National Museum of American Jewish History on Independence Mall.

Moments after she received her certificate, she says, "I don't feel afraid anymore," and that she has rights.

She and her mother, father and two brothers came to the U.S. in 2009. Since that time, I remind her, she had rights.

"I didn't think that I did," she says. In America or not, she was still an Iraqi. Now she is an *American*. "I feel like I was just born again."

The first time she was born was 1993 in Iraq, a couple of years after Saddam Hussein was driven out of Kuwait and the world imposed sanctions on his regime.

To compress a lot of history, Iraq's defeat led to an uprising of Shiites in the south and Kurds in the north, resulting in a brutal crackdown. That eventually led to the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, after which things went from bad to worse.

"You didn't feel safe outside or inside of your home" because of bombings and kidnappings and murder, she says. "There were no public services, no electricity, no good education, no life." She takes a breath. "Everybody's afraid, it's like living in a nightmare." After a while it almost began to feel normal.

In 2006, the Abdulrasool family fled the violence of Baghdad for Syria, because it was close and the cost of living was affordable.

Sara's mother, Zainab, was a math teacher. Her father, Zaid, had been a helicopter pilot, but was disabled in a 1999 accident.

They found conditions in Syria not much better and appealed to the United Nations for refugee status, which was granted. They hunkered down in Syria and waited three long years until they were accepted by their adoptive mother, the United States.

They came to Philadelphia because Zaid had family here. They live in North Philadelphia, not far from Temple University, where Sara, 21, is a junior majoring in neuroscience. Her two younger brothers are in school.

Sara is a fluent English speaker because it was a required second language in Iraqi schools, when Iraqi schools were functioning. Her minor is political science and she hopes to be able to work for the U.N. someday so she can help other refugees as she was helped.

We spoke as the turmoil in Iraq was growing, mostly the result of radical Islamists invading Iraq. "Radicals are destroying the country," she says.

Aside from friends and her grandparents there, the only thing she misses about Iraq is "the food, definitely."

The thing that surprised her most about America was not the freedom and opportunity - she expected that - but "how nice people are," she says. "People were always helping us" and were caring and respectful.

The thing that I love about legal immigrants is that they do the right thing and see clearly what many of us forget: The promise of America is as authentic as our flag and is as undiminished as our ideals.

Also, Americans are pretty nice people.