

Seeing a duty to the displaced

Former-Marine enlists help in alleviating Iraqi refugee problem

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GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

Tyler Boudreau relaxes at home in Leeds in March 2007.

NORTHAMPTON - In April 2004, Marine Capt. Tyler E. Boudreau watched the exodus of Fallujah's residents in the days before American forces laid siege to the Iraqi city.

Four years later, Boudreau, who has since resigned from the military and settled with his family in Leeds, says he's driven to help find ways to help Iraqis displaced during the war.

"We were in the position of creating displaced people," Boudreau said of his battalion and other units, who warned the people of Fallujah to clear out before an impending battle with insurgents in the city.

"Here are the very same people we had been sent to Iraq to liberate - in other words to help and get out of a bad situation."

An estimated 4.7 million Iraqis have been forced out of their homes due to violence since the American invasion in 2003. About 2 million Iraqis have fled the country altogether.

Next month, Boudreau plans to visit Jordan, where some 750,000 Iraqi refugees live in poverty and fear of deportation because they are barred from employment as illegal immigrants.

The weeklong fact-finding trip is the first step in an initiative by the Iraq Veterans Refugees Aid Association, a group Boudreau recently founded with former Army Capt. Luis C. Montalvan.

Boudreau acknowledges many other groups are already doing a lot to aid the refugees. He and Montalvan, though, hope to form their own firsthand view of the refugee situation, and to help raise awareness of it back home.

"We feel like our identity as former military persons will help bring that awareness," Boudreau said. "What we can do is perhaps capture a new audience."

July 24 at First Churches in Northampton, Boudreau will outline the aid association's mission. He'll also speak about his forthcoming book, "Packing Inferno," which follows his experiences and personal struggles during the eight months he patrolled Iraq's treacherous Sunni Triangle.

The event is sponsored by the Amherst-based Veterans Education Project and Physicians for Social Responsibility.

Jordan, which borders Iraq to the west, has the second-highest concentration of Iraqi war refugees, according to Boudreau, while Syria has the highest concentration.

Already well versed in the documented plight of Iraqis refugees in Jordan, Boudreau said he wants to see their situation for himself. The stories he's read reflect that many are forced to drain their savings or take under-the-table jobs in order to survive. This sets them up for poverty and exploitation, he said.

Another Northampton resident already has a firsthand perspective on the refugee experience in Jordan. Claudia Lefko has been to the country four times since 2006 as part of her Iraqi Children's Art Exchange Project.

Lefko said the living conditions of the displaced in Amman, Jordan's capital, vary widely depending on how much money they brought when they fled Iraq. What they have in common, she said, is loss and a surprising resilience.

"The people who are there are exhausted, bereft," she said. "They've left behind their families, dead and alive. People manage amazingly, actually, but it's a terrible, terrible situation."

Native Jordanians also resent the refugees, whose influx is sometimes blamed for rising food and gas prices, Lefko said.

On a trip to Amman last September, Lefko said, the city seemed flooded with humanitarian groups and journalists focused on refugees. Still, she said Boudreau's upcoming trip to Jordan will be worthwhile.

And unique, given that he's a former Marine. Lefko likened Boudreau to veterans of the Vietnam War, who returned to that country after they'd laid down their arms.

"You want to connect with the source of the trauma," she said.

Boudreau said he began thinking seriously about the displacement and refugee crisis within the last year.

In March, while attending a gathering of Iraq veterans in Washington called Winter Soldier, he crossed paths with Montalvan.

Montalvan, of Brooklyn, N.Y., a 17-year Army veteran, served two tours in Iraq from 2003 to 2006. Since leaving the military last year, he has advocated for an end to the war. Montalvan is now a graduate student of journalism and strategic communications at Columbia University.

Boudreau and Montalvan formed the Iraq Veterans Refugees Aid Association soon after Winter Soldier. They share the belief, Boudreau said, that the U.S. has an obligation to assist displaced Iraqis.

"The follow-up is, Let's take care of these people," he said.

Rob Wilson, director the Veterans Education Project, said he's excited to hear what Boudreau and Montalvan have to say after their trip.

"This is an opportunity to educate people about the impact the war is having on civilians in Iraq," Wilson said. "These are stories the public needs to hear."

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