

# 'We Know You're Not The Bad Guys'

When U.S. attorney Bill Gould said this to Rasheed Qambari and three other Kurdish men, he meant it. During Saddam's brutal regime they'd been firmly pro-U.S., working for a U.S. funded NGO in Iraq. In the late 1990's, facing risk of execution, they were whisked away by our government and brought here to Harrisonburg for a new life.

Valley churches have a long tradition: love thy neighbor. We round up housing, translators, jobs, driving, English, worship, and money for internationals. But now we are dismayed at government treatment of Kurds we've welcomed.

Rasheed Qambari graduated third in his university class with a physics-math degree. When he fled Iraq he forfeited a free graduate education. He worked two poultry jobs here, saving \$15,000 to bring his wife and sons. A talented multilingual, he also volunteered as translator for the local court.

But now Rasheed and three other Kurds have been charged with felony money transfers under the U.S. Patriot Act. They are devastated, facing jail, fines, deportation, felony record, uncertainty about citizenship.

What did these men do to

make the FBI think they were bad guys? Actually nothing different from what they had been doing - perfectly legally - for several years: supporting their families here and back home.

With no functioning banking system in Iraq, sending money home was complicated. So Rasheed and several other trusted men helped transfer money for other Kurds in the same situation. They deposited the money in their Harrisonburg banks, with assurances the procedures were proper, and had the banks wire it to bank accounts of friends in neighboring countries or the U.S.-funded NGO they'd worked for before, which distributed it.

Then everything changed. The Patriot Act, enacted a month after 9/11, made a simple transfer of someone's money a felony regardless of knowledge or intent, a radical shift in criminal law. Rashid and the others had neither knowledge of this draconian provision

nor any wrongful intent. But under the Patriot Act provision that didn't matter. A score of FBI agents raided the four families' homes, taking belongings, financial records, even one family's cash down-payment for a house that Hope Community Builders had built them. What did investigators learn? That the payments were for

real needs, the money legitimately earned, the transfers proper and non-fraudulent, and the processing fees reasonable.

The decent thing at that point would have been to advise the men that the law had changed, give them a warning, and get on with finding money transfers by the bad guys the law was written for. Instead, the inadvertant friendly fire in this war on terror became like fratricide. The four men were charged under the dragnet Patriot Act provision. Rasheed was found guilty of making the transfers and stands a convicted felon. A second man has pled guilty. The other two

know there is no defense but cannot believe they must be branded criminals. The government isn't promising citizenship now. Or safety from deportation, the men's greatest fear. Their lives are shattered. Ever since the raids, their children cringe at any official-looking person at the door. Even if these fathers avoid jail or big fines they are aghast at the shame of being felons for life.

But the shame is misplaced. It belongs on the conscience of U.S. Attorney John Brownlee, who seemingly builds a career by instructing U.S. Attorney Bill Gould, a decent man doing his job, to rack up easy convictions against innocent people. Integrity would have ended a fruitless investigation and moved on. When an overly broad law turns loyal innocents into felons, Congress take note: never give a pit bull to someone who doesn't know when to call off his dogs.

"We know you're not the bad guys" the U.S. prosecutors say to our hardworking Kurdish friends as their dreams descend into nightmare. The question is, can the Kurds say the same about them?

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