

# Mighty oaks from little acorns grow

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By Elizabeth Block, EJB Communications, London (a two time Walker for Iraq)

Nadia Al Shadhir was born and raised in London to Iraqi parents who have lived to date in the UK for nearly 40 years. A banker by profession, she is currently based in Dubai and works for an NGO that helps develop microfinance across the region. She was, like most overseas Iraqis, extremely concerned when the country was attacked in 2003 and took action to help the victims. Her charity movement, Walk for Iraq, now a global effort, was launched in 2007.

It all began with a walk home from work.

“It was 2007 and I had been participating in charitable causes and awareness campaigns, mostly around the Arab cause, since 2003. I also arranged some fundraising events. One day I decided I didn’t want to take the train home from my office near Liverpool Street station. So I thought I’d see how far I could go,” Nadia says.

“I ended up in Hammersmith – that’s a good 13 miles. After that, I started to walk nearly every day whether rain, snow or shine.”

These long walks, along with a very powerful video by Tina Arena called: “My name is Baghdad - *Je m’appelle Baghdad*” - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiRugtbQGA8> - eventually inspired Nadia: “Why not organise another of my fundraising events around walking...?” she asked herself. “I spoke to my brother and we brainstormed on a name for the event.”

The winning name was simple and straightforward: **Walk for Iraq.**

## **The First Walk**

Over the next few years Nadia devoted all her extra time to planning her new initiative - which she regards as a movement and not a charity - and developing marketing materials. The first Walk for Iraq took off in June 2007 from Hastings to Rye, attracting 30 people – and raising more than GBP 21,000 – three times the target!

Nadia recalls the first walk: “We had a great time on the walk and everyone was happy, some even claiming it was the best day of their lives as they met like minded people. We had people from different backgrounds, religions, nationalities as we were not all Arab - there were many non Arabs. We even went into a church at the end to light a candle for the people of Iraq.”

And very soon, to Nadia’s surprise and delight, the Walk for Iraq went international: A New Zealand-based activist called Yazen Al Safi heard about the Kent event rang Nadia. “He asked me if he could hold the event in Auckland and use our marketing materials – and call it Walk for Iraq,” Nadia says – and Yazen went into action on the other side of the world. Nadia was amazed to hear that NZ’s Minister of Ethnic Affairs joined the NZ walk - and to see extensive media coverage

“When I first saw the YouTube video of the New Zealand walk I was moved to tears,” she recalls. “I thought it impossible that I played a part in this. Never did I anticipate this happening.”

At the same time expressions of interest began to come in from the USA and Canada. “To date we’ve had Walks for Iraq in 11 different cities. We also have initiatives such as football tournaments and fundraising dinners in between as sometimes the walks take a long time to plan.” In regard to the Toronto walk, Nadia says, “We had leading news channels and newspapers with the event being described as one of the most successful fundraising initiatives the Canadian Red Cross have ever seen for the Middle East.”

## **The Team**

The UK team is led by Yasser Astarabadi, a personal friend from many years back. “I trust him immensely and can see how passionate he is – and full of ideas. I would choose him a million times over as our UK lead,” Nadia says. Others include Yazen Al Safi in Qatar and Saba Issa in New Zealand.

Other team members include Zainab Shnyin who led the first Toronto Walk and Nadia's brother, Asaad Al-Shadhir, who provides technical advice and comments on the Walk for Iraq concept as a whole. "All in all, we are a team of six people that I would never exchange for the world. They are my backbone and they made Walk for Iraq happen! I owe them a lot," she says.

Each year Nadia and her team try to focus on a different theme for funds raised. "So far we have raised funds for the refugees, the victims of war, the orphans and this year the widows," she says, referring to the Widows of Mesopotamia project, a project monitored and controlled by Help the Needy Charitable Trust. On 10 September 2011, a 23 km walk in East Suffolk attracted more than 50 people – and raised over GBP 20,500 for this cause. With the money raised, they aim to radically improve the lives of many Iraqi widows by helping them attain job placements, better healthcare and education.

### **Funds raised**

So far, Walk for Iraq has raised more than USD 150,000 through personal/individual sponsorships. Hand picking the cause and charity with the support of her team, Nadia's beneficiaries include well established non-governmental organisations that provide for Iraqis in need:

- International Committee of the Red Cross
- Refugees International
- UNICEF's emergency relief fund for Iraqi children
- The Iraqi Orphan Foundation
- Iraqi Christians in Need
- Help the Needy Charitable Trust.

Nadia stresses that Walk for Iraq provides for Iraqis of all backgrounds and religions. "We even donated to the victims of the Church bombings in late 2010," she says.

In the coming years, Nadia would like to focus on children with disabilities and medical needs – and she wants to attract serious fundraisers. "I'm happy that our Walks for Iraq are fun and they provide an opportunity to meet people - we've had four Walk for Iraq weddings so far. But of course the purpose is not social – it's to raise funds."

She now plans to continue walking - and spreading the message. "I would like to involve children to raise their awareness of their parents' homeland and to help children in need in Iraq. I would also like to attract more non Arabs as this to me demonstrates unity and shows that our awareness campaign is slowly spreading across the globe. It's a real case of mighty oaks from little acorns grow."

**For further information and the latest news, please visit: [www.walkforiraq.com](http://www.walkforiraq.com)**

**For the Facebook Page, please click here: [Walk for Iraq](#)**