

Iraqi Resettlement in Sacramento:  
The Role of the State in Shaping Iraqi Refugees' Experiences

By

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the process of Iraqis' incorporation into the United States. The geopolitical context of the Iraq War and subsequent unrest has led to the creation of a new group of 'contemporary' refugees. Through in-depth qualitative interviews and participant observation with recently-arrived Iraqi refugees in Sacramento and service providers at a local refugee resettlement NGO, I explore the modes of Iraqis' incorporation into the U.S. and how Iraqi refugees respond to each other and to the context of their reception. Iraqi newcomers shatter the preconceived notion of the refugee as rural, poor, uneducated, and lacking agency. As educated, professional urbanites from higher socioeconomic classes, Iraqi refugees do not fit the stereotypical image of the 'traditional' refugee, which subsequently affects their interaction with local refugee service providers and the larger experience of resettlement in the United States. This research may contribute to the construction of alternative resettlement models targeted toward Iraqi and other 'non-traditional' refugees in the United States.

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## **Introduction: Iraqi Resettlement in the U.S.: Why does it Matter?**

Immediately following the events of September 11, 2001, the United States and its allies declared a global ‘war on terrorism.’ In political and public discourse, terrorism was constructed to be intimately linked to Muslim countries and societies. U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 resulted in massive population displacements. Iraqis started to form a new diaspora and a small but significant fraction began moving to the United States seeking refuge. What happens to the displaced when they are forced out of their homeland into that of the invader’s? What is Iraqis’ mode of incorporation into the United States, given the special circumstances surrounding their migration? What is the relationship between Iraqi refugees and service provider NGOs? How are Iraqis, both individually and collectively, responding to each other and to the context of their reception in the United States? Are they forming a unified community led by their common experience and a sense of nationalism as other groups have? Or are they retrenching into smaller collectives built around internal ethnic and social boundaries? These are the main questions guiding this research. They are important queries for both theory building and practical purposes, for they can help us understand the present conditions and potential future of Iraqis in the United States, as well as provide general guidelines for practitioners and policy makers interested in refugees in general and Iraqis in particular.

The overall aim of this thesis is to better understand Iraqis’ incorporation into the U.S. in light of their average sociodemographic characteristics (*i.e.* highly educated, English-speaking, middle-upper class), which contrast with the most recent refugee populations arriving from other parts of the world. Specifically, this study examines the

contemporary case of Iraqi refugees in the Sacramento metro area. It examines how their sociocultural characteristics, conditions of departure, and the context of reception shape their experience of resettlement, identity formation, and group structure. Sacramento County is an ideal site for this research because of its new and rapidly growing Iraqi refugee population. Indeed, this study could become the first phase of a potential longitudinal study examining Iraqi's long-term settlement process. Additionally, Sacramento has recently become the resettlement place for various refugee groups from around the world. It has a number of well-established refugee NGOs currently providing support services to refugees. This context provides an opportunity for comparing and contrasting Iraqi refugees' experience with that of previous refugee groups and examining the evolving resettlement structures supporting them.

This is an important and relevant area of research: an estimated 76% percent (41,220) of Iraqi refugees admitted into the United States between fiscal years 2006 and 2010 were resettled in California and of those, 8.5 percent (3,484) were resettled in Sacramento County alone (U.S. Dept. of State, 2011; CA Dept. of Social Services, 2010). Additionally, this research may contribute to the construction of alternative resettlement models targeted toward Iraqi and other 'non-traditional' refugees arriving in the United States.

Existing migration and refugee literature has proven useful for contextualizing the Iraqi case study. Specifically, I examined the subfields of geopolitics and the State, assimilation theory, and migrant community formation and ethnic group dynamics in the United States. The study in particular interrogates both the relationship between the context of reception and refugees' internal solidarity and the conventional construction of

refugee as impoverished, uneducated and powerless (see Gold, 1995). The Iraqi refugee situation calls for further study, as there has not yet been substantial investigation of the Iraqi ‘special case’ in particular. Much of the existing refugee literature continues to reinforce the perception of the ‘traditional’ refugee and their resettlement experiences (e.g. Hirschman, 2004). This research may have policy implications for the refugee resettlement process in the United States, particularly for ‘contemporary’ refugees who would benefit from programs designed for their specific needs.

Chapter one examines the pertinent literature in order to situate the case study within the larger field of migrant and refugee studies. In chapter two I discuss the research design and methodology utilized. Chapter three provides an historical context within which the massive Iraqi displacement has taken place. Here I discuss the geopolitics between Iraq and the United States and the general characteristics and geography of the current Iraqi exodus. In addition, I provide the contextual conditions of the recently-arrived Iraqi refugee population in Sacramento. In chapter four I present the most important findings from my interviews with recently-arrived Iraqi refugees and with some of the staff from one of the most important local resettlement service NGOs. Chapter five discusses the meaning and implications of the findings and presents a general conclusion and some practical recommendations for policy reform and resettlement programming that might be beneficial for Iraqi refugees in Sacramento and beyond.



## **Chapter 1: Situating Iraqi Refugees within Existing Theory and Literature**

This research builds on previous studies that examine how educated, professional, urban refugees experience reception and incorporation in the United States (Gold, 1995; Guarnizo, et al., 1999). It challenges previous works that conceive of the intra-group solidarity among migrant national groups in the United States as a key mechanism for incorporation into the receiving society (Portes, 1987; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Zhou, 1992; Kasinitz et al., 2008; Hirschman, 2004), and supports other studies that discover pronounced individualism and social fragmentation within migrant groups in the U.S. (Gold, 1995; Guarnizo, et al., 1999; Menjivar, 2000). I follow Guarnizo's (1999) recommendation that "categories of exclusion" such as race, regionalism, socioeconomic class, and urban origin are central to immigrant incorporation, identity formation, and ethnic group dynamics (p.391).

### **Geopolitics and the Role of the State**

Literature generated within migration and refugee studies explains the major causes of migration and processes of displacement, the role of borders and the State, and the resources and rights that different types of migrants can acquire. The larger global contexts that play into the mass movement of peoples, such as globalization, neo-liberalism, geopolitics, and the ideologies behind key bureaucratic systems at the global, national, state and local levels, is also a common area of focus within the literature (Marfleet, 2006; Castles & Miller, 2009; Somers, 2008; Keane, 2003; Chimni, 1998; Wimmer & Glick-Schiller, 2002; Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; Malkki, 1992, 1995; Bauman, 2004; Brun, 2001). These topics continue to be growing areas of research because of their politically complex and changeable nature.

Modernization, industrialization, colonialism and imperialism engender sociopolitical change and global inequity. Globalization is the most profuse manifestation of modernization and a major cause of migration (Bauman, 2004). Although the concept of globalization has been popular in recent years, global migrations are not a new phenomenon in human history. Globalization generates concern over sustainability and overpopulation (Bauman, 2004), which has stimulated a complex dialectical process of increasing human mobility and mergence of global labor markets. At the same time national borders are strengthened and a global civil society seems to be emerging (also see Buruma, 2006; Calavita, 2005; Castles & Miller, 2009; Keane, 2003).

In other words, two processes are taking place simultaneously: border permeability and increasing human mobility, and also increasing mobility restrictions, securitization, and rejection of refugees and asylum seekers. While some analysts emphasize the increasing importance and impermeability of national borders, others emphasize the opposite, their fluidity and porousness. The increasing number of international migrants and refugees, the emergence of global labor markets, as well as the tremendous growth in global tourism and trade are used to illustrate increasing global mobility in general. For example, there are an estimated 214 million international migrants worldwide; in other words, 3.1 percent of the world's population is currently migrants. This is an increase of 42.6 percent over the last ten years (IOM, 2011). Further, by the end of 2010 there were 15.4 million refugees worldwide compared to less than 3 million in the mid-1970s (UNHCR, 2010). Global tourism has also drastically increased, from 25 million in 1950 to an astounding 806 million in 2005 (UNWTO, 2006). The first half of this year alone brought in a new record of 440 million tourist arrivals

internationally (UNWTO, 2011). Societies and corporate actors associated with global and regional organizations like the WTO, the EU, and NAFTA greatly benefit from such fluid globalization that allows for the free mobility of capital, trade and global labor markets. Not everyone benefits from globalization, though, for the world's poor continue to get poorer as globalization fails to redistribute wealth for more equality and justice (UN, 2001). Those most negatively affected by the restructuring of the global economy become economic/labor migrants in search of employment. Economic migrants and refugees fleeing persecution are constructed differently by the State. For example, economic migrants have to secure work visas for legal employment in the United States while refugees are granted employment authorization through their status (SSA.gov).

The new construction of borders, policies and bureaucracies has shaped migration patterns and processes (Bauman, 2004; Keane, 2003); these in turn have shaped the degree and character of migrant incorporation. These are not new processes. During the Cold War, for example, in the wake of World War II, the Vietnam War and the Cuban Revolution, the U.S. admitted high numbers of Eastern European, Vietnamese and Cuban refugees, respectively. This open and welcoming policy, however, contrasted with a persistent denial of refugee status to people fleeing political persecution from regimes friendly to the U.S. like Central America and Haiti. It seems that there are complexities and contradictions in the geopolitics that shape refugee policy and migrant incorporation (Chimni, 1998; Marfleet, 2006; Freeman, 2004). It is important, then, to explore some of these apparent contradictions and the mechanisms shaping them.

Specifically, State labeling distinguishes immigrants from refugees. While both groups are a result of geopolitical contextual conditions, the experience and opportunities

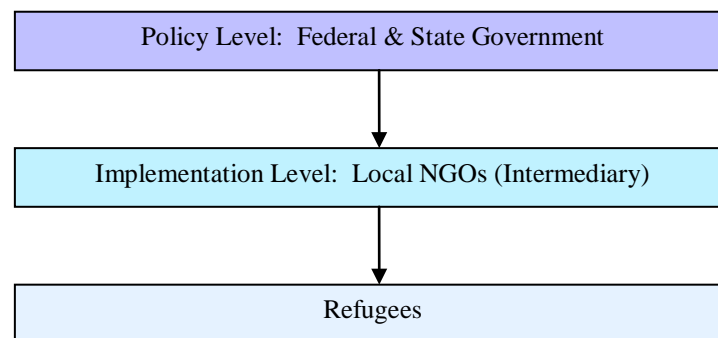
afforded to both ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’ are significantly determined by the context of departure and of reception they encounter. Reception is based on the state’s perception of the newcomer, as well as civil society’s perception and whether newcomers have a co-ethnic/national community in the place of arrival (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). The state’s role is perhaps the most powerful factor affecting migrants’ and refugees’ mode of incorporation. In effect, it has the power to determine who is allowed to be in and who is not, as well as the power to assign legal status and rights to newcomers. International law resulting from multiple multilateral agreements (such as the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to Status of Refugees) – especially those signed by the U.S., for they are legally binding – has determined who is a refugee and what rights are associated with this status. Despite these agreements, it is ultimately the national state who has the sovereign power to determine who is accepted as a refugee and who is not. However, the state’s position may vary, for it is embedded in the shifting context of internal political structures, as well as global geopolitical interests and conflicts.

Shifting geopolitics affects refugee representations and policies. In fact, the term ‘refugee’ has been defined and redefined repeatedly by politicians and state administrators internationally (Marfleet, 2006). ‘Refugee’ is an ideologically and politically category first put forth in post-World War II Europe (Malkki, 1995; Chimni, 1998). In 1951, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and its mass of displaced people, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) was created to address refugee issues as a global human rights concern (Malkki, 1995). Given this structure, the formal definition of and rights associated with the refugee status have become a multilayered, multi-scalar apparatus ranging from the global to the national to the local.

Some of the organizations working at these multiple levels include state sponsored, as well as faith-based and secular international NGOs (Nawyn, 2006; Hirschman, 2004). Refugee organizations implement programming that reflects the current geopolitical context and political structures, which in turn shape the refugees' experience of resettlement and incorporation.

In the United States, it is the government at the federal level that decides who can and cannot receive refugee status. Government agencies like the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, International Office of Migration, Department of Health and Human Services, and Office of Refugee Resettlement create policies, set quotas and govern admissions. These federal institutions then contract the actual resettlement work to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) at the local, national, and even international level. These agencies act as an intermediary between government policy and refugees by 1) advocating for refugees, 2) implementing federal & state policies, and 3) initiating programs for refugees with federal & state funding (Nawyn, 2006). It is in this way that effective and mismatched policies alike are reflected in the approach taken by refugee NGOs.

**Figure 1: Refugee Resettlement Organizational Structure**



This model shows how the state shapes the nature of programs focused on resettling refugees, incorporating them into U.S. society, and supporting their economic

self-sufficiency. Refugee resettlement relies on federal-local relationships that afford states influence over refugee resettlement, an influence they lack regarding the settlement of economic or labor migrants. Economic migrants in search of employment and/or a better financial situation (a common example is Mexicans in the U.S.), have less access to rights and public services than refugees, who are more closely controlled by the State. Further, all refugees are granted work authorization upon their arrival in the United States unlike economic migrants who must secure visas for legal employment (SSA.gov). This forces many unauthorized migrants into the underground labor market in order to survive while avoiding deportation (Alba & Nee, 1997; Nawyn, 2006).

Some scholars find fault with the resettlement structure described above, stating that the model involves little outreach and support. Canadian scholar Irene Bloemraad (2006) finds the United State's emphasis on legal and economic incorporation rather than social and political belonging problematic. She calls for more government intervention in migrant incorporation as well as a stronger multiculturalism policy in the U.S. If this were to be the case, economic migrants might have greater access to the same rights and benefits currently afforded to refugees because both groups would be more closely accounted for and controlled by the State.

While the State possibly plays the most influential role in the way of migrant and refugee incorporation, there are other factors that shape the process. The following section on assimilation theory will take a deeper look at the nuances between incorporation, assimilation, and acculturation concepts as presented in existing literature.

## **Assimilation Theory**

As stated in the previous section immigrant and refugee incorporation is contextual, shaped by differences in law, bureaucratic procedure, and variation in national ideologies/philosophies. Integration is structured through government policy, institutions, social networks, community organizations and ethnic leadership – what Bloemraad calls “structured mobilization” (2006, p. 9). Socioeconomic class, level of education, rural or urban origins, and whether the migrant came alone or with an intact family are all factors in assimilation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Alba & Nee, 1997).

The existence of a co-ethnic community, its conditions, and resources is an especially important factor affecting the context of reception (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Alba & Nee, 1997). For example, Portes and Rumbaut (2006) found that ethnic enclaves offered communal support to new immigrants in America but also hindered the assimilation process. Generally, first generation migrants had a more difficult time transcending co-ethnic communities into mainstream U.S. society than subsequent generations (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). In situations where no co-ethnic community exists, or where the ethnic community is highly fragmented, group members may display more individuality but lack the social support needed for entrepreneurial advancement and access to transnational connections, like in the case of Colombian migrants in the U.S. (Guarnizo & Diaz, 1999; Guarnizo, et al., 1999). The traditional pattern of migrant settlement within ethnic enclaves is changing, with increasing residential mobility among immigrants with human capital. While labor migrants still tend to concentrate in ethnic enclaves, immigrants with higher levels of education, linguistic assimilation, experience, and skills tend to suburbanize quickly or even settle in suburban areas upon their arrival

in the United States, *e.g.* Indians (Alba & Nee, 1997). This spatial assimilation is often equated with socioeconomic assimilation, the upward mobility of status, education, occupation and income levels (Alba & Nee, 1997).

In order to examine assimilation theory and its evolution, we must first understand the historical context it is tied to. The great wave of immigration to the United States between 1850 and 1930 was composed mostly of White Europeans. At this point social scientists assumed that assimilation was “both desirable and inevitable” and used the terms assimilation, acculturation, and upward mobility synonymously (Kasinitz, et al., 2004, p.4). Subsequently, many European groups sacrificed their ethnic traits in order to become the ‘average White American’ (Alba & Nee, 1997; Kasinitz, et al., 2008).

Robert Park and his associates at the University of Chicago provided a critical, initial contribution to the construction of assimilation theory. They conceptualized assimilation as a societal process instead of a normative concept. Park discussed the increasing heterogeneity of individuals and the “implications of racial impediments to assimilation” to situate assimilation in a modern context (Kivisto, 2005, p.8). He broke with the then prevailing influence of biological determinism, the belief that a human behavior is determined by genetic or biological factors. Instead, he emphasized the role of culture, society, and ethnic group agency (Kivisto, 2005). Three decades later, Milton Gordon (1964) further contributed to this theoretical argument. In his widely cited work exploring new immigrant assimilation in 1960s America (Gordon, 1964), he examined all the contemporary theoretical discourses and opted by assimilation as the most appropriate model.



These assumptions were challenged in the mid-1960s when the national composition of the immigrant population in the U.S. changed from being mostly European to mostly Latin American, Caribbean, and Asian. This shift is explained by 1) the U.S. 1965 immigration reform act that eliminated racial quotas favoring Western and Northern Europeans, 2) previous immigration flows that included many Asians, and 3) the United States' heavy political, military, and economic presence in Latin American and the Caribbean. These new immigrants, marked by their differences in race and ethnicity, arrived in the U.S. when civil rights and anti-war movements in the U.S. encouraged a revolt against Anglo-conformity. Social scientists began to question whether giving up one's own ethnocultural identity was the only way of 'becoming American' (Kasinitz, et al., 2004). Resistance to integration grew as critiques against White America took hold in the late 1960s and 1970s. Assimilation was exchanged for a more pluralistic theory that reflected the 'ethnic revival' of the time (Kivisto, 2005).

The 1990s ushered in a renewed interest and reappropriation of assimilation, identifying it as a powerful, but not inevitable, force (Kivisto, 2005). Classical assimilation theory was critiqued as being overly simplistic and unable to capture the complexities of an increasingly layered and diverse society. Assimilation had taken on a negative connotation associated with the eradication of ethnic or racial traits for the sake of complete integration into dominant society (Alba & Nee, 1997). In this latest version of assimilation theory, more focus was given to the experience of the ethnic group and their desire to incorporate into the receiving society (Kivisto, 2005). Words like inclusion, incorporation, or integration started to appear as synonyms or alternatives to

assimilation, reflecting the desire to invest the concept with a more multicultural dimension.

While assimilation theory was fundamental in examining ethnic immigration patterns in the United States at the turn of the 20th century, it does not give adequate attention to the mixed and continually evolving case of ethnicity today. Assimilation is not always a one-way process, but rather a dialectical process through which minority cultures and traits may also be absorbed into the mainstream society. Alba and Nee (1997) call for a “reformulation” of assimilation theory and propose a new definition that remains neutral about whether changes are one-sided or more mutual. They aim to reinforce assimilation as a social process that occurs instinctively and often unconsciously through social interaction: “Assimilation can be defined as the decline, and at its endpoint the disappearance, of an ethnic/racial distinction and the cultural and social differences that express it” (p.863).

Portes and Zhou (1993) have also criticized conventional assimilation theory as inadequate and formulated the concept of *segmented assimilation* to show how the group/community context affects the outcome of the individual in the process of assimilation. They challenge a previously held assumption that immigrants and their children first undergo acculturation and then seek acceptance in their host country before engaging in upward mobility. Instead, in their study of Haitians and Cubans in Miami, and Mexicans and Vietnamese in Southern California, Portes and Zhou (1993) found that the process was more segmented, following a three-part path of upward assimilation, downward assimilation or selective acculturation (Portes & Zhou, 1993). This approach illustrates how the process of assimilation is more dialectical than mechanical, and proves

to be an interesting case when applied to my own inquiry. 'Contemporary' refugees may be most likely to follow the path of *selective acculturation* because it allows for both economic integration and the preservation of certain ethno-cultural traits and traditions. Segmented assimilation may not work for economic immigrants and refugees alike because these groups arrive with different levels of social, economic and cultural capital.

Although segmented assimilation made a significant move beyond the "simplistic assimilationist paradigm," it is also criticized for being too narrow in scope and depth (Espiritu & Tran, 2002, p.368). It continues to rely on the notion that acculturation is a linear process of migrants moving away from their native culture and towards their new receiving culture without acknowledging the dynamic, and sometimes conflicting, complexities of such a process (Wolf, 2002). Those critical of 'assimilation' call for a reconceptualization of the term and point to 'transnationalism' as a more complete way to examine migrants' everyday experiences (Espiritu & Tran, 2002; Wolf, 2002; Kivisto, 2005).

Finally, G. Freeman (2004) argues that trying to document the different typologies of immigrant incorporation in Western nations is pointless, and instead suggests a definition of *integration* that "rejects permanent exclusion but neither demands assimilation nor embraces formal multiculturalism" (p.945). Freeman's idea of integration closely parallels the concept of selective acculturation because it eliminates the requirement for complete assimilation or acculturation in order to become American. This concept varies by individual State and its domains (state, market, welfare, culture) to create a policy that is "not fully assimilationist, pluralist, or multicultural" (Freeman, 2004, p. 960). Freeman's idea of integration can be extended to many different types of

migrant groups, from labor migrants who tend to stay in ethnic communities and assimilate over generations, to ‘human capital’ migrants who may undergo rapid socioeconomic or spatial assimilation (Alba & Nee, 1997).

Human capital and the context of community support are critical to the incorporation of migrant groups (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). The following section, which closely examines migrant community formation and ethnic group dynamics, will explore how social, cultural, and economic capital are built within communities, and whether or not these contribute to the sociocultural and economic incorporation or assimilation of migrant groups in the United States.

### **Migrant Community Formation and Ethnic Group Dynamics**

Looking at the existing literature on migrant community formation and ethnic group dynamics is important for this research because it helps to explain in which ways ‘contemporary’ migrants are, or are not, constructing communities and in what style co-ethnic and co-national affiliations are forming, if at all.

There are two main approaches in this subfield. The first states that hostile environments tend to foster a strong sense of intra-group cohesion and solidarity as a key mechanism of survival within migrant and refugee communities (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Zhou, 1992; Kasinitz et al., 2008; Hirschman, 2004). For example, C. Hirschman (2004) characterizes immigration as an alienating experience that encourages people to gravitate towards the familiar, *i.e.* ethnic enclaves, that reaffirm identity and belonging in a new social context. He writes that migrant groups tend to seek out organizations that provide a venue of group cohesion to protect them against hostility from the host population. Further, Portes and Rumbaut (2006) write about ethnic enclaves serving as a

strategy for material and social resources for immigrant minorities. One example is the function of communal solidarity among Chinese immigrants in New York City's Chinatown (Zhou, 1992). Another example is the case of the Cuban enclave in Miami as discussed by Portes and his collaborators (1987, 2006). It is not surprising that many recently-arrived migrants choose to settle in co-ethnic communities where they can access linguistic, cultural, and culinary familiarities. Such geographic concentration is an "inevitable by-product of immigration, which is guided by social networks and leads to settlement patterns determined partly by the need of new immigrants" (Alba & Nee, 1997, p.857).

The second approach states the opposite, that some immigrant and refugee communities are fragmented by regional, class, ethnic and religious background. They are distrustful of co-ethnics and display more individualistic behavior. For example, Luis Guarnizo, et al. (1999) found a high level of social fragmentation and mistrust within Colombian migrant groups in their research in New York City and Los Angeles. This fragmentation was in part born out of the negative stigma associated with their group as 'undesirable Colombian drug traffickers.' Fragmentation also came from the complexities engendered by a highly heterogeneous population. Contrary to the literature on ethnic group dynamics and community formation, the hostility they encountered resulted not on heightened internal group solidarity, but in social fragmentation along regional, ethnic, and class lines. Colombians tended not to have in-group associations and there was a high level of individualism that stood as a barrier to organizations of mutual assistance (Guarnizo, et al., 1999).

Similarly, Steven Gold (1995) observed group fragmentation among the Soviet Jewish refugee population in California as well. He challenges (Jewish) assimilation and ethnic solidarity models with his empirical data, stating that Soviet Jews don't join the formal ethnic associations of the American Jews, as expected. Gold observed a high level of individualism and distrust within the Soviet Jewish community. They exercised "class and culture-based patterns of interaction and support [was] maintained within these social units" (Gold, 1996, p. 284). Soviet Jews were intent on separating themselves from co-ethnics; such in-group distancing can work against broader community formation and organization. Sources of this segmentation included regionalism, questioning of co-ethnic's morality, and status degradation (a demotion in social and/or professional position) (Gold, 1995).

Further, during her study of Salvadorian migrants in the United States Cecelia Menjivar (2000) concluded that "a common nationality does not automatically translate into ethnic solidarity" (p. 104). She observed fragmented social support networks along class, gender and generational lines, disputing the assumption of migrant group unity based on ethnic, cultural or national similarities. In this case, migrants/refugees were coming from a country in the middle of a devastating civil war, the last of the Cold War.

There has not been any attempt to create a unified theory out of the similar findings of Guarnizo, Gold and Menjivar, but what seems common in these three cases is the 'importation' of class, regional, ethnic, and political divisions from the homeland to the new country. These authors have recommended further research to examine the phenomenon of fragmentation, mistrust, and exclusion within ethnic migrant groups in the United States.

The current literature on migrant community formation and ethnic group dynamics is twofold. While the first approach holds that migrant and refugee communities rely on group solidarity as a key mechanism of survival, the second approach states that some immigrant and refugee communities living in the U.S. are deeply fragmented, displaying individualized, distrustful, and fragmented behavior. Both approaches identify a framework useful in discussing migrant community formation but the literature as a whole does not address the differences between these two approaches nor does it provide guidance about which approach should be used. The aim of my research is to highlight the complexity of refugee group dynamics. It is not a clear cut process; in fact, instances of group unity and fragmentation often function within the same subpopulation instantaneously. I'll use the Iraqi case in Sacramento to examine this theoretical division further.

## **Chapter 2: Research Design and Methodology**

In order to address my research questions, I decided to enter the field at the local level through an NGO providing services to refugees. Participant observation at a local refugee organization would allow me to observe the resettlement process firsthand and better understand the dynamics between service providers and recently-arrived refugees. Also, centering my inquiry on an NGO service provider would allow me to examine the intersection of state policies, refugees, and everyday processes of incorporation. Entering the field through a local agency would also help me connect with Iraqi refugees willing to be interviewed for this study.

I chose Opening Doors, Inc. (ODI) because of its 18 year history of working with international refugees and its strategic location in the heart of Sacramento, which has been recognized as one of the most diverse cities in the country. ODI, located in midtown Sacramento, works with three main populations: victims of human trafficking, low-income entrepreneurs, and refugees. ODI is a local affiliate of Church World Service (CWS), an international volunteer agency (VOLAG) headquartered in New York. CWS is contracted by the International Office of Migration (IOM) to carry out resettlement work in partnerships around the globe. The IOM is an intergovernmental organization that was established in 1951 to facilitate and regulate “humane and orderly” migration worldwide. With 132 member states, 17 observer states, and more than 400 field locations in over 100 countries, the IOM partners with governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental partners on migration and development issues ([iom.int](http://iom.int)). Through their relationships with local partner agencies, CWS assists refugees, responds to natural



disaster emergencies, and works toward social and economic development worldwide, from North and Latin America to Asia and parts of Africa.

ODI is located in the heart of Sacramento's midtown in a small, inconspicuous building. There are 11 full- and part-time staff members and approximately 20 volunteer interns. Interns carry a lot of responsibility and are treated as staff members within the organization. Like many 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations in the area, Opening Doors is particularly small and operates a modest budget from federal funds and donations. They have an Advisory Board and a Board of Directors made up of community leaders from local business, faith-based groups, and other community organizations. The Advisory Board (4 members) provides input to the staff and Board of Directors on services and issues related to the agency's various programming. The Board of Directors (7 members) is responsible for managing ODI's finances and programs, and supervising the Executive Director. Additionally, they work to promote the organization and its programs by soliciting support from the larger Sacramento community.

The Executive Director of Opening Doors is an older White Jewish man, a retired attorney and Peace Corps alumni. He moved from an Advisory Board position to the directorship about 2 years ago. The majority of the organization's staff are White (with the exception of the Microenterprise Program Director, who is an El Salvadorian refugee, and the Refugee Resettlement Program Director, who is a Bosnian refugee), female, middle-class, and college-educated Sacramento area residents.

The agency serves a diverse group of clients from Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and the Middle East. The number of refugees they serve fluctuates, depending on the number of refugee cases they are assigned from CWS and the amount of funds they

have access to. The majority of their current refugee clientele are from Asia (Nepal and Bhutan) and the Middle East (Iran and Iraq). In the past most of the refugees they serviced arrived from the former Soviet Union, Latin America (El Salvador), and Southeast Asia (Vietnam and Cambodia). The primary languages spoken at ODI are English, Spanish, and Russian. The agency hires other language translators when necessary. During my time with the organization, there were no Arabic speakers on staff, although there was a young Moroccan-American man who interned at the organization twice a week specifically to aid staff with Arabic translation services.

I obtained access to the site by applying and getting accepted into their internship program in which I completed 400 volunteer work hours over a ten-month period starting in June 2010. The interns are undergraduate and graduate students from UC Davis, Sacramento State, and McGeorge School of Law, and some working professionals with advanced degrees. Typically I would spend 12 hours per week at the ODI office on various weekdays. My time there was spent providing transportation for refugees, advocating for refugees at the Department of Human Assistance, Social Security office, and various health clinics. I was also responsible for writing and entering case notes into Pegasus (the Church World Service master database), helping manage internal databases, working with the ESL program, and soliciting household donations for new refugees' housing resettlement. Another role I played was 'cultural broker,' someone who helps recently arrived refugees adjust to life in the United States (Pipher, 2002).

Through my participation at Opening Doors I observed the relationships between case workers and Iraqi refugees. I also observed and took note of the general characteristics of the Iraqis coming to ODI. Given the literature I had read, especially

Chimni (1998), Malkki (1995), Wright (2002), and Ahmed (2004), and the characteristics of the Iraqis, I expected to find tension between Iraqi refugees and local service providers because Iraqis didn't seem to fit the 'typical' profile of refugee clientele the agency was accustomed to working with. I also expected to see a certain degree of unity among Iraqis, considering their common national origin and shared experience of war, trauma, and migration to the United States. My first expectation was met while my second was not. What was surprising was the degree of segmentation within the Iraqi refugee population along ethno-religious and class lines and how this segmentation was navigated by the resettlement case workers I observed and interviewed.

During my tenure at ODI, I conducted 7 in-depth interviews with Iraqi refugees and 4 with resettlement case workers, including ODI's Director. I kept detailed fieldnotes from my hours of participant observation, and gathered focus group data that Opening Doors collected and gave me permission to use. I chose interviews as the most appropriate tool for gathering information because they would allow for intimate, holistic narratives from my respondents, allowing me to understand interviewees' recent experiences in the larger context of their life history. This qualitative approach gave depth and perspective to some of the hard data I had access to regarding the Iraqi refugee situation.

Interviews were in-depth, semi-structured and open-ended. They lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were recorded digitally. Most interviews took place at public libraries in the Arden Arcade neighborhood of Sacramento in partially private community rooms that could be reserved ahead of time free-of-cost. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim in Microsoft Office Word. Before the start of the interview, Iraqi respondents

were asked to fill out a face sheet soliciting basic demographic information, such as age, place of birth, family origin, marital status, highest level of education completed, national/religious/ethnic identity, and date of arrival in the U.S. (see Appendix A). The biggest challenge I faced during interviewing was positioning myself as a researcher to respondents who knew me only as an ODI intern. Those who perceived me an intern were more hesitant to talk openly about their experiences with Opening Doors because of my affiliation with the agency. In response, I reassured respondents of their confidentiality and emphasized the fact that I was not a paid employee at ODI. Otherwise, respondents were forthcoming, even eager, to share their stories.

Analysis was accomplished by coding the interview transcriptions into specific themes that were identified from the transcript data. Major themes based on the proposed research questions included 1) refugee lives in Iraq, particularly during the U.S. occupation and previous to their departure, 2) history of the actual migration and resettlement process, 3) Iraqi identity, 4) refugee experience with resettlement and incorporation into American society, and 5) community building experience in Sacramento. These categories arose organically as themes that became evident during interviews.

### **Sample Selection**

I devised a clear set of criteria to select the informants for the study. I only interviewed resettlement case workers who had at least 2 years experience working with recently-arrived Iraqi refugees in Sacramento. I only interviewed Iraqi refugees who had been living in Sacramento for less than 1 year, had applied for asylum while still in Iraq, and were receiving some degree of assistance from a local resettlement NGO in

Sacramento at the time of the interview. That would allow me to focus on their recent resettlement experience and interactions with refugee service providers.

The Iraqi sample is made up of 1 female and 6 male Iraqi refugees between the ages of 20 and 43. This selection bias was determined by the type of Iraqi refugees I had access to, as the vast majority of Iraqi refugees served by ODI are men. Several factors explain this. First, the majority of Iraqi refugees being placed in Sacramento are single men migrating alone. Many of them worked for the U.S. Army in Iraq, which aided their chances of being granted asylum in the United States. Second, unlike the men, women do not migrate alone. It is more culturally appropriate for female Iraqi refugees to migrate with their families or husbands. Third, the Iraqi women who are in Sacramento are less likely to come into the resettlement office and engage with service providers. Although there are some refugee families in the region, it is the husband who speaks English, physically comes to the resettlement office or calls when the family has concerns or requests. I've observed that women are much less likely to interact in the public domain and so I rarely had the opportunity to meet Iraqi refugee women in Sacramento.

Despite the small size of the sample, I found significant differences in the respondents' circumstances of migration, ethnic, religious, and class background. Four of the seven Iraqi respondents used to work for the U.S. in Iraq prior to migrating. Of these four, one migrated on a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV), a document granted to a very select group of individuals who worked for the U.S. armed forces in Iraq. To get an SIV, applicants should have worked for the U.S. military for at least 1 year, received a recommendation from a high ranking U.S. officer, and passed a rigorous security clearance. The remainder of the Iraqi sample migrated to the United States through the

UN asylum program, an application process that can take anywhere from 6 months to 3 years and involves numerous interviews, medical screenings and security clearances. Some did not have any choice in their resettlement country or city, the exception being three respondents who had a friend living in Sacramento that was willing to sponsor or ‘anchor’ them; these three cases were rather unusual, though, for most Iraqi arrivals in Sacramento come as free cases, that is, without any sponsorship. Nonetheless, the perception among ODI clients was that refugees are granted more rights in America than in Europe and are less likely to face discrimination (ODI Focus Group Data, 2011).

In regard to ethnicity, religion, and region of origin, the Iraqis I interviewed were mostly from Baghdad and identified as Arab Muslim, with a mix of Shiite and Sunni. One respondent was Kurdish Muslim Sunni from Northern Iraq. Several respondents identified themselves as Arab Muslim but secular or non-denominational. Regarding socioeconomic class, education level and profession, most of the population had some college education and spoke English fluently.

**Table 1: Sociodemographics of Iraqi Refugee Sample**

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Education Level	Most Recent Occupation in Iraq	Ethnic Identity	Religious Identity
Hakim	35	M	S	Associate Degree	Language Interpreter/ Security Guard	Arab	Shiite Muslim
Ali	35	M	S	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Language Interpreter/ Technician	Arab	Sunni Muslim
Hussein	36	M	S	Master’s Degree	Language Interpreter/ Supervising Coordinator	Arab	Shiite Muslim
Nasdar	20	M	S	High school Diploma	Electronics Repair	Kurd	Sunni Muslim
Amira	43	F	M	Bachelor’s Degree	Teacher/Administrator	Arab	Muslim (no denomination)
Mahmood	43	M	M	Associate Degree	Computer Technician	Arab	Muslim (no denomination)
Muhammad	33	M	M	Bachelor’s Degree	Community Organizer	Arab	Sunni Muslim

This mix is representative of the overall Iraqi migrant population in the U.S. and other countries, *e.g.* Jordan and Sweden, who tend to come from an elite and highly educated social stratum (Sassoon, 2009; U.S. Dept. of State, 2007; Ekman, 2007).

Those Iraqis who had not been employed by the U.S. government were less proficient in English. Most interviewees came from middle-class families where their parents had worked as teachers, doctors, electronic-repair technicians and small-business owners. The respondents who had worked for U.S. contractors in Iraq held positions as linguists, interpreters, security guards, supervising coordinators, mechanics, and technicians.

Recruitment of Iraqi interviewees was accomplished with the help of Opening Doors' resettlement case workers who introduced me to potential respondents and provided me with their contact information. Securing interviews with Iraqi refugees who had previously been employed by the U.S. government was relatively easy because of their level of education, social/cultural understanding, and English proficiency. Finding Iraqi refugees who didn't share these same traits was more difficult in terms of making contact, arranging conversations and interviewing due to significant cultural and linguistic gaps. I overcame some of these difficulties with the assistance of ODI staff and interns who helped me connect with these respondents.

### **Strengths and Limitations of Research**

A small, in-depth research project allows for a more complex examination of factors (high number of variables) shaping a process; one can then theorize about such relationships. However, the small sample size prevents us from generalizing to the larger population. Nevertheless, this case study provides strong, initial evidence that there is a

'mismatch' between local resettlement programs and the 'contemporary' refugee population yet to be addressed with implications for policy.



### Chapter 3: Historical and Current Context

Local refugee NGOs, whose resettlement models rely on traditional perceptions of the refugee, find it extremely difficult to provide the right services for Iraqis refugees who have high levels of formal education and come from urban areas (Sassoon, 2009). This ‘mismatch’ between local service providers and Iraqi refugees is an issue that might be eased by a greater understanding of Iraqi cultural and socio-political history.

Iraq has been in a state of conflict for over 30 years. Since the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 the Iraqi people have suffered through the Gulf War, attacks on Kurds in the North and on Shiite Muslims in the South, sectarian civil war, economic sanctions, the repressive effects of the Saddam’s Baath regime, and most recently the U.S. 2003 invasion (Sassoon, 2009). The outcome of such ongoing violence has been a highly dysfunctional government that is incapable of giving its people any sense of security, as well as a society with a limited sense of national identification and, thus, national solidarity. Joseph Sassoon, an Iraqi academic located in the U.K. characterizes this history of conflict and insecurity as a “deep trauma” in the psyche of the Iraqi people (2009).

After decades of conflict and violence, the world is only now seeing a mass exodus out of Iraq. Out of a total population of just over 30 million, there are currently 2.7 million internally displaced Iraqis and over 2 million Iraqi refugees, making Iraqis the third largest refugee population in the world after Palestinians and Afghans (UNHCR 2011). The American invasion and subsequent war in Iraq are most directly responsible for this population flight. The Bush administration gave many reasons for military intervention in the nation, namely to halt Saddam’s support of the militant Islamic

terrorist organization Al Qaeda and to dismantle his arsenal of weapons of mass destruction (Fudge and Stossel, 2002). Saddam's Baath regime was stained with aggressive military action against Iran and Kuwait, economic insecurity via international sanctions, and human rights offenses (Fudge and Stossel, 2002). He often said that "Allah [had] appointed him the avenger of his people," a belief he used to justify his foreign-policy decisions that caused the suffering of his own citizens (Bowden, 2002). Thus, Saddam became an internal and international enemy and the Bush administration pushed for his necessary (and inevitable) fall. Those critical of U.S. military action in Iraq felt that the invasion was a show of aggressive foreign policy "with the aim of making exemplary statements about American power" (Marfleet, 2007, p.403). The invasion was also seen as a play for natural resource (oil) control and the opportunity to build and benefit from a newly constructed free-market democracy in the region (Fudge and Stossel, 2002; Marfleet, 2007).

Regardless the 'true' motives of the invasion, the consequences of U.S. military action in Iraq have been devastating. After the 2003 invasion, countless citizens no longer had access to affordable food, drinkable water, or electricity when U.S. officials abolished the national subsidies program that so many Iraqis were dependent on. Further, U.S. officials dissolved the Iraqi armed forces and other state positions, adding 8-10 percent to the already high unemployment rate. (Marfleet, 2007; Sasoon, 2009). These deteriorating conditions, paired with growing insecurity, violence, corruption, and poverty engendered a significant emigration out of Iraq. Those first to flee, even at the risk of social and economic loss, were middle-class and wealthy professionals. This exit of Iraq's most skilled and educated citizens has created a detrimental 'brain drain' that

will detract from the eventual political and economic rehabilitation of the nation (Sassoon, 2009).

The majority of Iraqi refugees have migrated to neighboring countries like Syria and Jordan. However, since 2003 over 1 million have found refuge outside of the Middle East, primarily in Western Europe, Australia and North America (Sassoon, 2009).

Incidentally, the United States has accepted the smallest number of Iraqi refugees, a paradox considering the role they've played in creating Iraq's current condition.

American visas are becoming even more difficult for Iraqis to obtain as the United States plans to withdraw their military from Iraq. The *New York Times* reports that assisting Iraqi refugees is not a priority for the American government, who are "all but halting visas for Iraqis, even those who risked their lives aiding the American war effort"

(Arango, 2011). The fear of security threats has engendered rigorous background checks and other barriers that have all but stopped the flow of Iraqis to the United States. "This year [2011] could be the smallest since 2007, when the Bush administration was facing an uproar for not effectively addressing the refugee crisis" (Arango, 2011). The Iraqi refugee situation is often referred to as the invisible crisis because of the United States' and Iraq's reluctance in admitting that there's a humanitarian crisis and taking appropriate responsibility (Sassoon, 2009; Arango, 2011).

### **Iraqi Refugees: A Special Case**

Who are the Iraqi refugees? Those leaving Iraq are, for the most part, the affluent, highly educated, secular core (Marfleet, 2007; Sassoon, 2009). As these middle-class doctors, software engineers, and architects land in different countries, they find

themselves on the bottom-rung of the labor market, facing the hardships of poverty (Tavernise and Rohde, 2007b; Marfleet, 2007).

A typical Iraqi refugee in the U.S. tends to be middle class, educated, English speaking, and U.S.-affiliated, meaning they worked with/for American forces in Iraq as interpreters, guards, laborers and coordinators. In Iraq, aligning themselves with the American government is dangerous and risky work that must often be hidden from family, friends and neighbors. As the *New York Times* reports, Iraqis working for the U.S. are often kidnapped and tortured, accused of being spies and traitors, and issued death threats. In 2006, Iraqi interpreters were even rounded up and killed after British forces pulled out of a Southern Iraqi port city (Arango, 2011).

Beginning in 2006, the U.S. administration began to formally recognize the real danger that Iraqis who worked for Americans faced and set up the SIV (Special Immigrant Visa) program. “Congress established two special immigrant visa (SIV) programs to help qualified Iraqis who previously worked for the U.S. government in Iraq to immigrate to the United States. The administration has indicated its intent to assist those Iraqis who supported the United States in Iraq” (U.S. GAO, 2010, p. 1). SIV status is granted to a limited number of Iraqi employees who used to work with the U.S. Army in Iraq for at least 1 year and had received a recommendation from a high-ranking U.S. officer (U.S. GAO, 2010). The United States Citizenship and Immigration (USCIS) office, housed within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, describes the SIV program as such:

Iraqi nationals who supported the U.S. armed forces or Chief of Mission authority as translators or interpreters, or Iraqi nationals who were or are employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government in Iraq on or after March 20, 2003, for a period of

at least one year may be eligible for Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) processing (2009, p.3).

The program has been described as giving “preferential treatment to full-time employees of the American Embassy...and to 500 interpreters by allowing them to skip the lengthy United Nations refugee process once they leave Iraq” (Tavernise and Rohde, 2007b). Indeed, this process of streamlining immigration for Iraqis affiliated with the American military is significant. However, while it creates a special mechanism to protect individuals who risked their lives to help the U.S. in Iraq, from the point of view of many Iraqis, it is seen as an incentive for Iraqis to align themselves with the ‘invader.’ The implication of this perception is significant, for U.S.-affiliated Iraqis are often positioned as ‘native informants’ and thus ‘traitors’ in the eyes of co-nationals. They are accused of aiding the U.S. in order to get a ‘ticket out’ of Iraq’s crumbling conditions.

There are potential consequences of this policy for both those who have worked for the U.S. and the Iraqi population at large. The number of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis is significant (estimated at over 100,000), while the number of Special Immigrant Visas available is much smaller (capped at 5,000 per year). Subsequently, there are many more Iraqis who apply and are rejected than those who are actually granted SIVs. What becomes of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis left unrewarded for their efforts? According to the List Project, a grassroots organization working to resettle ‘Iraqi allies,’ Sunni and Shiite militias create hit lists targeting translator/interpreter ‘outcasts.’ A recently publicized document put out by an Iraqi militant group plans for the coming period of U.S. withdrawal by hunting and killing U.S. affiliates, ordering “nine bullets for the traitor” (The List Project). Certainly, this group remains in serious danger but receives less attention than the politically-charged SIV cases.

The general Iraqi population also pays a price for the Special Immigrant Visa policy, for Iraq continues to lose the citizens that would help with the political and economic rebuilding of the nation. Needless to say, refugee returns to Iraq are unlikely. Thus, stability in Iraq becomes a less-attainable goal and the country remains vulnerable to continued violence and conflict (Sassoon, 2009; Marfleet, 2007).

SIV status is particularly coveted because it puts a green card in the hands of the refugee within one month of their arrival in the United States. This serves to construct the category of a 'special' refugee who, unlike traditional refugees, is granted permission to bypass the bureaucratic process of asylum seeking and receive permanent resident status. This type of State labeling affects perceptions of the refugee in the U.S., their resettlement experience, and their access to services and resources.

Upon arrival, the refugee is 'constructed' by both the receiving state and civil society. In the 'special case' of Iraqi refugees in the United States, the role of the State and the particular geopolitical context in which their displacement takes place are essential in understanding not only the causes of the Iraqi exodus but also their position as refugees in the United States. While other refugee groups were openly welcomed to the United States in the recent past, such the Cubans and Vietnamese, the U.S. administration has been slow and cautious to accept Iraqi refugees in (Sassoon, 2009; Marfleet, 2007; Arango, 2011). After the attacks of September 11, 2011, the United States and its allies declared a so-called 'war on terrorism,' which in practice has become a war against fundamentalist militant Islamists both in the U.S. and the rest of the world. Muslims and Islam have been equated with terrorism and anti-Western ideology by influential public leaders in the U.S. and Europe (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). For example,

in early 2011 U.S. Representative Peter King initiated hearings on the radicalization of American Muslims, what many critics called a modern day McCarthy-style witch hunt (Bolduc, 2011). In Europe, Geert Wilders, right-wing politician of the Netherlands, has become infamous for his open criticism of Islam (Buruma, 2006; Traynor, 2008). Public attacks against the construction of a mosque near the former Twin Towers site in New York City is yet another example of the general public's association of Islam with the threat of terrorism (Grynbaum, 2010).

Even those Iraqis who aided the U.S. military are perceived as part of the enemy camp and a threat to national security. In the post-9-11 world, Iraqis tend to be perceived as Muslim, thus terrorist enemies. As a result they are not necessarily welcome. This hostile context of reception is rooted in the "terrorism fears" that now dominate U.S. refugee policy: the "Obama administration has required new background checks for visa applicants," making it more difficult than ever before for Iraqis to seek refugee in the United States (Arango, 2011).

With a growing number of Iraqi refugees being resettled in the United States, it's useful to examine how geopolitics affects the type of reception they are receiving in American cities. The following section focuses on their reception, and increasing presence, in the greater Sacramento area.

### **From Baghdad to Sacramento: A Growing Presence**

The number of Iraqi refugees in the United States has been generally increasing over time. In 2005, two years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, only 186 Iraqi refugees were admitted into the United States. This figure rose to 1,605 in 2007 and increased even more drastically to 18,709 arrivals in the 2009 fiscal year (ORR Arrival Data, 2010). The

UNHCR began to prepare for an Iraqi refugee crisis in 2003 but did not immediately see the mass displacement of peoples that was initially expected. Thus, money was funneled into reconstruction projects instead of humanitarian aid (Tavernise, 2007a; Sassoon, 2009). Now, with the growing refugee situation, the UNHCR has budgeted over \$264 million dollars specifically for Iraqi refugee programs (UNHCR 2011).

The number of Iraqi refugees is growing particularly in California. Between fiscal years 2006 and 2010 the United States admitted over 54,200 Iraqi refugees for resettlement and approximately 41,220 (76%) of those were resettled in the state of California. Of those, 3,484 (8.5%) were resettled in Sacramento County alone (U.S. Dept. of State, 2011; CA Dept. of Social Services, 2010).

Sacramento County has the third fastest growing Iraqi refugee populations in the state (U.S. GAO, 2010). In 2007 only 10 Iraqi refugees had been resettled in Sacramento County, compared to 667 in 2010 (CA Dept. of Social Services, 2010).

**Table 2: Top CA County Refugee Arrivals from Iraq: 2007-2010**

County	2007	2008	2009	2010	Total
Orange	21	125	171	344	661
Stanislaus	6	164	179	338	687
Santa Clara	10	77	162	480	729
Sacramento	10	53	162	667	892
Los Angeles	29	300	610	2339	3278
San Diego	252	1955	3231	3663	9101

*Source: California Department of Social Services, Refugee Programs Bureau, 2010*

The Sacramento metro area is an appropriate locale for studying Iraqi refugees because of the city's long history of welcoming in refugees from around the world, including Latin America, the former Soviet Union, Southeast Asia, and most recently, the Middle East. The city hosts multiple resettlement NGOs serving refugee populations in the area, making it a unique and intriguing place to examine Iraqis' resettlement process as well as the interactions between refugee groups and refugee service providers.



## **Iraqi Refugees in Sacramento**

In a recent article, Philip Marfleet (2007) discusses geopolitics and the role of America's neo-liberal policies in the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, highlighting how U.S. policy and actions have created a decentralized government that encourages sectarianism conflict and distrust among Iraqis. Using an historical and political context, he draws parallels between the British mandate of the 1920s when Iraq was carved into complex ethno-religious divisions, and the more recent actions of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) who in 2003 created a decentralized government that exacerbated sectarianism and distrust among Iraqi people (Marfleet, 2007). This type of 'divide and conquer' strategy reinforces fragmentation along ethno-religious lines. While he is thorough in examining the role of the State in fostering in-group fragmentation and violence, he fails to discuss how this has impacted Iraqis' assimilation process in the United States.

Sassoon (2009) has done extensive research on the post-2003 wave of Iraqi refugees. He focuses on those seeking asylum in the Middle East and Europe but gives scant attention to those who are resettling in the United States. He documents the causes of the Iraqi exodus using an historical, political, social and cultural context but makes no mention of the cultural socialization that many Iraqis experienced through their interactions with American soldiers in Iraq.

Iraqis are a new and distinct refugee group in the United States and there is little academic research on their specific case. What predominates in the current literature on Iraqi refugees is the notion that they are carrying over their internal divisions to their receiving countries. My aim is to incorporate the role of the context of reception as a key

factor in shaping their identity formation and social organization in the United States. I will build upon the work of Marfleet (2007) and Sassoon (2009) to present a more holistic portrait of the Iraqi refugee experience in the United States and analyze how the labeling of ‘contemporary’ refugee by the State affects their resettlement experience and access to resources.

The inflow of Iraqis to the United States pushed by the 2003 U.S. invasion has been a selective process. Those coming to the U.S. tend to be members of an elite social stratum. Other host countries have seen similar characteristics among their Iraqi arrivals. For example, in Jordan, the education levels among the Iraqi population are very high, with nearly half of the adult population having earned a bachelors degree or higher. Further, Muslim Iraqi refugees living in Jordan fall into the ‘high’ or ‘highest’ wealth categories (U.S. Dept. of State, 2007). The Iraqis in Sweden – a country that holds the reputation for generously accepting the highest numbers of Iraqi refugees – are no different. The *New York Times* reports that “most who make it here [Sweden] were affluent – almost all have paid \$10,000 - \$20,000 for the papers they need to get out of Iraq – and they are often highly educated” (Ekman, 2007). Despite their economic means, middle- and upper- class professionals could not secure their own safety or stability in Iraq. High rates of unemployment and inflation made prospects for the future bleak (Sassoon, 2009). Further, academics and professionals such as lawyers and doctors were targeted for kidnapping and murder:

In May 2005 the Iraqi Medical Association estimated that some 250 doctors had been kidnapped...The Union of Iraqi Lecturers estimated that 200 university teachers were killed in the eighteen months following invasion...between 250 and 500 university teachers had been killed or had ‘disappeared’, victims of campaigns in which Iraq’s intellectual communities were being systematically assaulted (Marfleet, 2007, p.412).

These ‘terror tactics’ were used to silence anyone who might express resistance and caused the flight of Iraq’s most skilled and educated to flee for their lives (Marfleet, 2007).

Given their socio-demographic profile, Iraqi refugees coming to Sacramento do not fit the stereotypical images associated with the last wave of refugees who had arrived in Sacramento – poor, illiterate, rural Southeast Asians fleeing the Cold War’s Vietnam War and Indochinese conflicts. Local NGOs charged with assisting Iraqis have built their operations based on traditional constructions of the refugee, which don’t match up well with Iraqis’ urban experiences. Taking these differences into account, I use the following research questions to guide my study: What is the Iraqis’ mode of incorporation into the United States? What is their relationship with local service providers? How are Iraqi refugees, both individually and collectively, responding to each other and to the context of their reception in the United States?

#### **Chapter 4: Findings: Iraqi Refugees' Experiences in Sacramento**

This chapter presents the central findings of my research. It touches upon a number of key topics related to the relationship between Iraqi refugees' conditions prior to exiting Iraq and their mode of incorporation and settlement in Sacramento. In particular, the chapter documents the significance of the interaction between Americans and Iraqis employed by the U.S. government in Iraq and how this experience has affected Iraqi refugees' interaction with local refugee NGOs and their resettlement experience in Sacramento in general. Another key dimension covered in this chapter is a process of group fragmentation observed among Iraqi refugees and such fragmentation affects the prospects for community construction in Sacramento.

Three research questions served to guide my study. First, what is Iraqis' mode of incorporation into the United States? Second, what is their relationship with local service providers? Finally, how are Iraqi refugees, both individually and collectively, responding to each other and to the context of their reception in the United States? I formulated these questions through my initial observations at Opening Doors (ODI), the local refugee resettlement NGO in Sacramento where I worked as a volunteer intern for 10 months. I became interested in recently-arrived Iraqis' experience of the resettlement process, and how their relationship with the State and local refugee service providers shaped this experience. I was also curious about Iraqi refugees as a relatively new population in Sacramento. Were they constructing a collective community based on common experiences and shared nationality or settling into smaller groups based on preexisting social and ethnic segmentation? With my research questions to guide me, I entered the field to gather qualitative data through participant observation and in-depth interviews

conducted with recently-arrived Iraqi refugees and their service providers at Opening Doors.

Several major themes emerged out of the data collected that will be discussed in this chapter: 1) the paramount importance for the resettlement process of cultural and social exchanges between Iraqis and Americans via the U.S. army prior to leaving their home country, 2) a marked discord between local resettlement case workers and newly arrived Iraqi refugees in Sacramento, 3) clear intra-group fragmentation within the Iraqi refugee population, and 4) emerging prospects for new community formation among Iraqi refugees in Sacramento.

### **Emplaced Sociocultural Migration: Becoming an American in Iraq**

Traditional assimilation theory assumes a sociolinguistic distance between newcomers and the receiving society, an assumption that is questionable in the Iraqi case where over 100,000 Iraqis worked for U.S. contractors in Iraq as linguists, interpreters, security guards, supervising coordinators, mechanics, and technicians before coming to the U.S. (Sassoon, 2009). These individuals were exposed to American culture and customs via their interaction with one of the most cohesive and organized American institutions, the U.S. Army.

U.S.-affiliated Iraqis being resettled in American cities form a very select group of people. Most of them are young, single men from the Iraqi middle-class, who possess a good level of formal education and are fluent English speakers. As local employees of the United States military, they worked for and socialized with U.S. soldiers and were thus exposed to a particularly intense process of acculturation that involved getting acquainted with and using American English in their daily lives, and learning everyday

U.S. popular social and cultural practices. Their acculturation experience involved not only daily relations with American soldiers and officials, but also with U.S. and Western media including television, movies, and the like. In other words, one can say that they ‘migrated’ socially and culturally to the United States while still in their native country. Dr. Luis E. Guarnizo calls this process *emplaced sociocultural migration* (personal communication, March 24, 2011). Iraqi refugees aren’t the only ones who’ve found themselves in this position. Wolf (1997) found that Filipinos also experienced sociocultural migration into American culture and society while still in their native country due to American involvement. Although both groups were exposed to American culture prior to migration, the Iraqi experience is different because of the complex and multilayered political situation between Iraq and the United States.

The following quote is from a man I will refer to as Ali, an Iraqi refugee in his mid-30s who has been in the U.S. for about 3 months. I met Ali just a few weeks after his arrival in November 2010 when I was asked by Opening Doors to provide transportation for him from his home to the Refugee Health Clinic. I found him to be sociable, considerate, and talkative, addressing a plethora of topics from weight-training to playing chess. Ali completed schooling in Iraq through the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and is currently pursuing his GED. He has a proficient command of the English language and worked as an interpreter for the U.S. Army in Iraq, during which time he lived closely with American soldiers for 4 years in small FOB (Front Operation Base) camps. He talks about his experience of emplaced sociocultural migration through daily interactions with U.S. soldiers:

You can say that all the people who work for the American Army... maybe 98% of them, they get Americanized. Because living, eating, you know, celebrating

with them for three, four, five years...that's a long time! At the beginning I refused to believe that idea, but by that time I figured out that maybe I am more American than I am Iraqi... I don't feel I am [a] stranger here.

Another respondent in his mid-30s, who I'll refer to as Hussein, had a similar experience with sociocultural migration. At the time of our interview, he had been in the U.S. for about 5 months. I met him a few days after his arrival in September 2010 when I accompanied him and a few other recently-arrived Iraqis to the Department of Human Assistance office in Sacramento. His English is impeccable – in fact, the resettlement staff at Opening Doors would joke that Hussein was “really a guy from Nebraska” because his American accent was so convincing. He earned his master's degree in English, completing his thesis in Baghdad on the American English accent in 2003. He comes from a well-established family and his mother works as a doctor. Hussein is open and reflective, interested in talking about big-picture life philosophies. He was active in helping with ODI's English language classes and occasionally volunteered his translation services for the agency.

Hussein worked for about 3 years as an interpreter and later as supervising coordinator for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), a position that required him to “mediate escalating issues” between Iraqi civilians and the U.S. Army. He felt that his command of the English language, advanced degree, and interpersonal skills made him qualified for the job. Like Ali, he interacted with Americans on a daily basis, and his position with the CPA required him to have a command of the social, cultural, and linguistic nuances of U.S. society. Through this work, he says:

I get used to western life. I spent 3 years, almost, with the western people so I get to know the way they're living... I mean, once I got here, I kinda start interacting with the society here. So I became like an American citizen so I don't feel like I'm a refugee, really. Yeah. Wasn't a real problem for me. Particularly if I know

the ways they're acting and can communicate with the western people so it should be no problem. I'm kinda familiar with everything around here so that wasn't really making me feel that I'm a stranger.

The emplaced sociocultural migration of this select group of Iraqis has eased their transition into the U.S. and helped their smooth incorporation. In other words, their emplaced migration facilitated their spatial migration – their emplacement was a bridge for their displacement. Refugee resettlement case workers also recognize the significant role of this relation in these Iraqis' incorporation into American society. Jessica, a recent-college graduate in her mid-20s who has been working at ODI as a refugee service provider for about 2 years, says:

The ones who work for the U.S. government – we call them SIVs [special immigrant visas] – they tend to assimilate very quickly, very easily. Obviously, a big factor is that they usually have a very good grasp of the English language. They've also been in constant contact with Americans for years and they know how things work already. And a couple of our SIVs actually remain in contact with American soldiers that they worked with and have used those relationships to find jobs, to find... everything – housing, everything.

The relationships between these select group of Iraqis and their American friends, acquaintances, and former co-workers act as social capital for these refugees once in the U.S. Here, Ali reflects upon these connections:

When I talk to some of my friends that I used to work with in the Army, some of them ask me if I need help, if I need something... that's interesting, you know. My friends, the American officers and soldiers... [I'm still in touch] with some of them, yeah. I told them whenever I need help I wouldn't hesitate to ask them. Yeah. They told me how they appreciate my help for them. A lot of them I really appreciated from my heart.

Ali felt that the social networks and cultural/linguistic skills he had acquired through his enclave experience with Americans in Iraq would take other refugees ten years to obtain. While he “passed through all those stages in advance,” he felt that refugees who didn't have previous experience with Americans would have to spend much more time and



energy getting acquainted with Americans and American culture. The following quote from a young man I will call Nasdar, who did *not* interact with Americans in Iraq, illustrates this point:

I just very, very [much] wish that I get a friend American. You know? Because I need to talk with him, understand English. If I don't start talk with him I never, never understand English.

Nasdar, a 20 year old Muslim-Kurdish-Iraqi man, migrated to the United States with his parents and two siblings. The respondent's family was able to seek asylum in the U.S. because of an uncle's work with the U.S. government in Iraq. While the uncle's affiliation put the family in danger, it gave them the opportunity to seek asylum in the U.S., an opportunity that wouldn't have been likely otherwise. I was connected to Nasdar through a case worker at Opening Doors and had not met him prior to our interview. He had been in the U.S. for 7 months and was taking English classes and struggling to find employment. He completed high school in Iraq but didn't think attending community college in Sacramento was practical or realistic. His older sister doesn't speak any English, his younger brother is 10 years old, and both his parents have health issues that make it difficult for them to work, making Nasdar the primary provider for his family. Nasdar is sociable and curious but his English ability is lacking. He can speak 'survival English' but often struggles to express himself fluently. While he felt that having an American conversation partner was the best way to learn English, he expressed some frustration in making American friends with whom he could converse. Nasdar didn't undergo any sociocultural migration before coming to the United States, which has contributed to his lack of English skills and feelings of social alienation. He does not have access to the same social capital as those who had previously established

relationships with Americans via the U.S. Army. This was also the case among the other two Iraqi respondents who were not U.S.-affiliated.

Given the atmosphere of mistrust for Arab Muslims in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> U.S., even for this select, exclusive group of Iraqi refugees, not all is clear and easy. Despite their apparent privilege position to easily assimilate into American society, Iraqis who work for the U.S. Army seem to be positioned in a liminal space that locates them neither here nor there. As one Iraqi translator wrote on his online blog, “We are traitors in our people’s view, spies in the American view. We are stuck in the middle! Who are we?” (Iraqi-translator.blogspot.com). I encountered similar narratives of identity construction and displacement among the U.S.-affiliated Iraqis I spoke with. One respondent, who I will refer to as Hakim, comes to mind. Hakim came to the U.S. a little under 5 months ago with a Special Immigrant Visa. I was acquainted with him on the same day I met Hussein, while assisting a few Iraqi refugees at the Department of Human Assistance (DHA) office in Sacramento. Hakim, now in his mid-30s, completed high school and earned a mechanical training certificate in Baghdad. He had also been enrolled in engineering military college to study general mechanics but never completed the program. My initial impression of Hakim was that he was particularly ‘Americanized.’ His English language skills, the slang he used, the way he carried himself, his mannerisms, and how he interacted with American officials at the DHA and Social Security offices were different from many of the other Iraqis I had met, even those who were U.S.-affiliated. Hakim’s relaxed and confident demeanor seemed to lack the naivety and anxiety of uncertainty that I had observed in other recent refugee arrivals.

Hakim was employed for over 3 years as a security guard and language interpreter for the U.S. Army in Baghdad. He spoke with great detail and interest about his work with the U.S. government, even showing me his military identification and security clearance cards during our interview. Despite a lack of formal military training he spoke military jargon – the language of the U.S. government – and was extremely knowledgeable about the U.S. military’s organization and structure. He continually used the ‘war language’ that he learned in Iraq, a language peppered with words like “civilian,” “local national,” “IED” (Improvised Explosive Device), and “POC” (Point of Contact). This exemplified the new identity construction he underwent during the enclave experience of living on a U.S. military base in Iraq for a little over three years years. He was coming from a strong social (military) structure and, in a sense, seemed to be ‘frozen in time.’ His sense of identity was so closely tied to his work with the U.S. government in Iraq that he now struggled with a dissonant displaced identity – contradictory processes identifying who he is, where he fits in, in Iraq and in the United States, and what role he plays in a new society.

Hakim is the only SIV in Sacramento that I met during my time in the field. This is not surprising, considering how difficult it is to obtain SIV status. The number of Iraqis who have aided U.S. military efforts in Iraq number in the tens of thousands but only 5,000 per year will be rewarded for their efforts with Special Immigrant Visas. These visas are especially desirable because of the resources they afford. SIV status privileges recipients by granting them a green card soon after arrival, paving the path to citizenship in five years, and giving them the freedom to return to Iraq at any time. Refugees, on the other hand, are not allowed to return to their homeland for 10 years. If they do, they

would automatically lose their visa and be deported – this makes a tremendous difference. It is in this way that State labeling affects refugees’ access to resources. Those who are selected for Special Immigrant Visas are placed in the constructed category of a ‘special’ refugee who, unlike traditional refugees, are allowed to circumvent the bureaucratic asylum-seeking process, receive a green card, keep their original Iraqi passport, and bring immediate family members with them to the United States. Further, State labeling shapes refugees’ identity construction. For example, I found that Hakim, the SIV respondent, tended to have a different understanding of his identity in the United States than other non-SIV Iraqis. He felt that his special status differentiated him from other Iraqi refugees:

I’m not a refugee I’m SIV – special immigrant visa, so I still have my passport – the Iraqi passport. So I can use my passport to go back and forth to my country...if he comes as a refugee they not allowed to go back to their country...I am basically immigrant. So the ‘S’ is that I can bring anyone in my family, because it’s ‘special.’ And the ‘I’ ‘V’ is ‘immigrant visa,’ which is I am an immigrant and I have a visa. The refugee they don’t have a visa, they don’t have their passports at all.

Hakim self-identifies as an immigrant rather than a refugee and associates his SIV status with receiving certain benefits that are not afforded to ‘regular’ refugees. He is unusually well-informed about the nuanced subtleties of U.S. immigration and refugee regulations, in part due to his good connections. Just to apply for SIV status one is required to demonstrate these ‘good connections’ by submitting a recommendation from a high-ranking Army officer. According to Hakim, being selected for SIV status is helped by “working in a good position in a big unit with a high-rank officer...mentioning the badge number...and [making sure] they trust you.” Of course, ‘regular’ Iraqi refugees, even

those who are U.S.-affiliated, will not have equal access to such connections, nor will they have the same sophisticated knowledge regarding these processes.

While ‘special’ and ‘regular’ refugees are afforded different benefits based on their labeling by the State, both groups must undergo a specific resettlement process facilitated by local refugee service organizations. The next section introduces one of the key topics of my thesis, the relationship between Iraqi refugees and service provider NGOs.

### **Iraqi Refugees and Local Service Providers**

Examining the relationship between Iraqi refugees and local service providers is important because of the role it plays in Iraqis’ experience of incorporation into the United States via the local refugee resettlement process.

While the experience of social migration may help some Iraqi refugees integrate into American life, it also differentiates them from other refugee groups. Iraqis generally have a greater understanding of U.S. government systems and structures and so they have higher expectations for the resettlement process. Subsequently, refugee service providers characterized Iraqis as more demanding and difficult to work with. At the same time Iraqis characterized resettlement services as inadequate, disappointing, or even useless. The service providers felt it was Iraqis’ high expectations that were the source of the problem, while Iraqis felt that the problem was within the resettlement organization’s programming. This clash between Iraqi refugees and local service providers detracts from the effectiveness of the resettlement process for Iraqis. It also contributes to the mismatch between established resettlement programs and the needs of recently arrived Iraqi refugees.

There is the perception among resettlement case workers that Iraqi refugees who were formerly employed by the U.S. military have a greater sense of entitlement than those refugees who had little contact with Americans in Iraq. As this quote from Jessica, a case worker and recent-college graduate in her mid-20s, illustrates:

[There's a] difference between those Iraqis who worked for the American government versus those who didn't, who just came as refugees...we'll come across some clients who have a sense of entitlement...entitlement to the extent that, you know, Americans are responsible for the situation in their country right now and the reason why they're here, and so the benefits they receive from us, from welfare, is what they're entitled to. We do come across that view.

The director at Opening Doors, who I will refer to as Benjamin, shared the perception that SIV Iraqis felt more entitled:

There's an attitudinal difference. I mean, I remember one guy who I was talking about... somehow the subject of credit cards came up. [Our case worker] was finishing up some of her orientations and somehow or other credit cards came up and I was sitting in at that point. And I mentioned something about how they need to be careful about credit cards because they can find themselves in deep debt if they're not really careful about how they use a credit card. And this one guy, who was an SIV, you know, who had a gold chain around his neck, pulled this card out and said, 'Well I can get anything I want! My money is in Turkey.' Meaning that whatever he had done he had stashed away a lot of money in a bank in Turkey and so he had this nice card that he could pull down cash from whenever he wanted! And you know, that's... most refugees are nowhere near like that! He just had this very flippant attitude.

Service providers perceived Iraqi refugee clients as less willing than other refugee groups to start at the bottom and work their way up. Benjamin expressed this sentiment clearly and alluded to how American cultural values and ideology, such as meritocracy and individualism, have always shaped resettlement processes and expectations:

The way in which you work your way up in the American society is to WORK-YOUR-WAY-UP. You don't start at the top. And you don't get – in most cases – a job because your brother-in-law is in a position to give you a job and then you hold that job for life. Here it's a matter of merit... in most cases.

Consistent with this view, I often heard service providers complain that Iraqis have unrealistic expectations of the resettlement process. The following quote from Maja, a Bosnian refugee herself who has been working as a refugee resettlement case worker at ODI for slightly more than two years, illustrates the typical perceptions and frustrations among many refugee service providers:

What I can tell you is many Iraqis come here with really high expectations. I should call this the number one problem... It is true that most of them are really well educated but they're pretty much demanding, short-tempered... they definitely think that America owes them something so they think they should be treated differently from other refugees here, to be honest with you.

When asked about the source of these high expectations, several case workers pointed to Iraqis' knowledge of American culture and customs, usually from media sources like movies and television. Jessica said:

Working with the Iraqis is always interesting (laughs). From what we've seen they tend to have a fairly good idea of American culture – well, they have *an* idea about American culture... whether it's accurate or not is not always the case. You know, they see it on TV, a lot of them have had interactions with American soldiers that are over there... you know, American movies... they have an idea, which we found is often times really high expectations. They think that they're gonna come here and Americans have big houses with a lot of cars... and, you know, a lot of money.

What seems to be happening is that the media shapes Iraqis' perceptions of America. Socioeconomic status in Iraq and high levels of education also play into their high expectations.

Service providers often compare Iraqis to other, more 'traditional,' refugees who have come to Sacramento before. The construction of the 'traditional' refugee refers to those who had been living in refugee camps or rural areas of concentrated poverty before arriving in the United States. Resettlement workers put Iraqis' high expectations into

context by juxtaposing them and their experience to those of other ‘traditional’ refugees.

For example, Maja says:

The Bhutanese... it’s much easier to please them and satisfy them. Maybe it’s because of their background and home country. The place that they’re coming from...most of the Bhutanese are in the camps right now so they’re pretty much happy with any place that you put them in. But for example, for some of these Iraqis that come here ...at least what they’re telling us is that back home they had big, beautiful houses, that had people that worked for them and all of sudden you’re putting them in a small apartment. They have to be affordable and that means, probably, not in the greatest areas.

Benjamin, the director of Opening Doors shared another narrative along the same lines:

They’re not a population that takes direction well (laughs), whereas others who have nothing else in the world except their foot on this soil are very open and amenable to taking direction ... I remember an Iraqi couple who had just been settled in and they looked over the furniture and they said, “Well, this isn’t new,” and then they looked around and said, “Where’s the television?” Now I don’t expect to hear that from a Vietnamese, a Hmong, most Africans ... might hear it from an Iranian (laughs), but not necessarily from most of the populations that we’ve historically been moving in. So there’s an expectation of a level of standard of living... let me put it that way.

Comparing the Iraqi population to other refugee groups also reinforces the dichotomy between the ‘traditional’ refugee and the ‘new’ refugee. In other words, local agencies are bound to using a federal model of resettlement (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002; Nawyn, 2006) that relies on traditional notions of the refugee as homogeneously poor, uneducated, and powerless victimized people who left their homelands fleeing persecution. They fear for their lives and often are and should be grateful for any support they may receive in their new land (Chimni, 1998; Malkki, 1995; Wright, 2002; Eastmond, 2007). In many ways, newly arrived Iraqis do not fit this construction. As indicated earlier, many of them hold academic degrees and professional certifications, come from middle-class or even elite backgrounds, and are knowledgeable about western culture and structures.



In contrast to ‘traditional’ refugees, Iraqis come to the U.S. with a general understanding of the system and often have a sense of entitlement to resources from the receiving society. Benjamin acknowledged this by identifying Iraqi refugees as a unique case. “Well I think the first thing is to realize that we’re dealing with a very different population and to understand that and then try to adjust ourselves and the way we deliver our services.” Indeed, Iraqi refugees – educated, urban, English-speakers from a higher socioeconomic class – contrast sharply with Sacramento’s previous wave of refugees who were mostly rural, poor, illiterate Southeast Asians. They do not fit the ‘traditional’ refugee profile and resettlement case workers charged with assisting them are often unsure as to how to be most useful to this ‘unique’ population. The experience of being a ‘different’ population parallels that of the Soviet Jews who were resettling in California in the late 1980s. They were also positioned as a ‘unique’ refugee group and had difficulty with local service providers because of their high levels of education, skilled professional training, urban experiences and lack of integration with American Jews (Gold, 1995; Zeltzer-Zubida, 2004). The significant difference between the ‘special’ case of Iraqis and that of the Soviets is that the latter group had access to a co-ethnic community, even if they chose not to participate in it. This is not true in the Iraqi case.

The ‘traditional/ contemporary’ refugee dichotomy I have been referring to deserves a more detailed examination at this point. The traditional image of the refugee has been constructed as rural, poor, uneducated and disempowered – the ‘huddled masses’ of displaced women and children fenced into overcrowded refugee camps (Chimni, 1998; Malkki, 1995; Wright, 2002; Eastmond, 2007). These images are being challenged by the arrival of more recent refugee groups (Soviet Jews, Iranians, and

Iraqis) who are characterized as urban, middle- and upper-class, educated professionals. Due to these characteristics, ‘contemporary’ refugees have a different experience of the migration and resettlement process compared with ‘traditional’ refugees, and their experience is sparsely acknowledged in academia or reflected in policy.

To illustrate how perceptions of ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ refugees are established and reinforced, I’ll share an experience I had during one of my observation days at the Opening Doors office. One afternoon I sat in on an informal meeting between Maja, the Refugee Resettlement Program Manager, and Benjamin, the Director. Maja was lamenting to Benjamin about her challenges in working with the Iraqi population, whom she found demanding and ungrateful. She perceived them as people who “do not really need to be here taking the place of those who do [really have needs] – the *real* refugees.” When there was a pause in their discussion, I asked Maja what she considered a “real refugee.” She replied:

Refugee has one meaning – someone who doesn’t have anything and is here because they really need help...someone who fled their country for many reasons but they have *real* fear...real refugees don’t have anything – no money, just like the Bhutanese...Iraqis have new laptops, flat screen TVs...where are they getting money from? And yet they still have so many needs and requests...these people, they don’t like where we are putting them [in regard to housing and job placement].

Further, she complained to the director that Iraqis were “gaming the system” and felt that those coming in on SIV (Special Immigrant Visa) status were getting a “free pass.”

Maja’s resentment toward Iraqi refugees was fed by previously established perceptions of what a refugee is – poor, powerless and fearful. She couldn’t place Iraqi refugees as fitting this perception, into this clearly bounded mold because some Iraqis had expensive possessions, money, and made various requests they considered they were entitled to

throughout the resettlement process. Thus she characterized Iraqis as “modern” refugees that were displacing “real” refugees truly deserving of services and resources. This dichotomy between the deserving and the undeserving echoes similar, well-known arguments deployed in old debates about entitlements in the welfare state system.

Service providers often failed to display a similar understanding about the general social, political, historical and cultural aspects of Iraqi-Arab culture. For example, Opening Doors did not have any Arabic speaker on staff in the ten months that I interned there and they often struggled to find interpreters to help with translation. This is highly problematic and impedes their work, considering that the majority of their current refugee clientele are Arabic speakers. This reality has not escaped the attention of the refugee population. When I asked Hakim if he thought his cultural values and norms were understood and taken into account at the resettlement agency, he responded, “I think they are trying but they can’t. They try to understand what is my culture... it is different but it depends on the individual that is coming here.” Hakim felt that it was difficult for local case workers to understand how cultural nuances were shaped by regional, ethnic, religious and class differences among Iraqi refugees. ODI staff is also well aware of the negative implications of their limited sociolinguistic resources. Indeed, resettlement service providers did express the need to have more cultural competency. The majority of case workers wanted to have Iraqi cultural orientation and linguistically resourceful staff. This particular case worker, Jessica, said it best:

Right now...I think that our weakest link might be in relating to them [Iraqis] on a cultural, personal basis. We have nobody of any Arabic decent at all on staff... we have one Arabic-speaking intern who is *very* part-time. So...I would love to see, you know, somebody who speaks Arabic on staff. I think it would really help our trust, our bond, with the clients.

A deeper understanding of Iraqi cultural and socio-political history would be beneficial for service providers working with this population and might ease some of the tension between recently-arrived Iraqi refugees and resettlement case workers.

Tension between service providers and perceptions of refugees encourages a misunderstanding of the ‘contemporary’ refugee experience, which has real effects on the resettlement process for those involved. As illustrated in the above passage, the perception among the case workers I interviewed is that Iraqi refugees are a privileged group not experiencing direct persecution or danger. The Iraqi refugees I spoke with told quite a different story. Most of them cited fear and violence as the primary reasons for wanting to leave Iraq. Those who worked for the U.S. government as translators were especially concerned about their safety and the security of their families. As Ali, a former translator, said, “We feel like we are live targets in the streets.” Interpreters working for Americans in Iraq are under constant threat and often required to conceal their identities or risk assassination, as Hakim, also a former interpreter, describes their daily reality:

I wear a mask [when I was translating for the Army]. I shouldn’t show my face because that would be really dangerous. You work really close to neighbors and because of the security situation in Iraq... things have changed. Your neighbors have a different inclination. It would be really dangerous if he realized that you work with the U.S. military because most of the people, they don’t like them [Americans]. So that’s a thing...if we die, we die. No one can protect you...it’s just dangerous.

Ali echoes similar fears:

Our situation was bad in Iraq. I didn’t go to my home... Because at that time anyone who is absent from his home for a few days or a week or longer he will get kidnapped by the militia... and they will use many kinds of ways to make him talk – mostly torture, you know, until he talks. And when he talks, he gets killed (laughs)...so I didn’t want to take that chance, especially when so many people get killed down there. One of the interpreters who used to work with the British Forces, one kilometer away from my home, got killed. He was trying to get to his house and they shot him. So I thought... better not to go home.

Even Nasdar, the non-U.S.-affiliated Kurdish respondent, expressed concerns about violence and safety, primarily because of the ethnic conflict between Kurds and Arabs in Iraq:

In Iraq they have fighting...it's dangerous in Iraq...you know, because my family, my neighbor... we have someone who kill him because he Kurdish. If Kurdish go to the Arabic State, that's very dangerous for him. And for us – my uncle work for the U.S. and so my family is in very much danger from that, so we move in the United States.

While narratives of fear came up repeatedly among Iraqi respondents who felt that they faced direct danger in their native country, case workers were less likely to recognize or legitimize this narrative. The refugees' class background and assertiveness seems to blind service providers from appreciating the real fear and threats to their lives these Iraqis faced and made, threats which turned them into the legitimate refugees they have become.

### **From Respectable Middle-Class to Unemployed Poor**

Despite set perceptions about the Iraqi refugee population, case workers were cognizant of the group's downward mobility upon their arrival in the United States. Iraqi refugees and local service providers alike highlighted status loss and lack of appropriate employment placement as the most challenging factors affecting the population. As Maja said:

It's really hard and difficult to... it takes time to lower their expectations. From their arrival there is denial—when I'm trying to tell them, explain to them the reality of the situation they're facing—any kind of situation that they're having—jobs for example, so many of them won't even work some kind of lower entry position. And I understand, because they have backgrounds of good education, which is completely understandable. But unfortunately, the reality is that as someone who just arrived in this country, doesn't have any experience in the United States... there's no way to just start where you left off back home. You have to start a little lower, you know, with a lower position.

Jessica also referred to Iraqis' downward social mobility process noting that:

It's definitely an education thing. A lot of Iraqi clients are really well educated. You know, we see a lot of engineers, a lot of doctors... a lot of people who held high positions where they came from... so coming here and starting over is really difficult... It's really hard to tell somebody who, you know, maybe was a doctor back home, that the reality is they're gonna have to work at a gas station or be a janitor. It really is hard for them to accept that, as opposed to the Nepalese who – you know, working at a gas station, cleaning houses... that's completely fine. As long as they have a small income to keep them living and their families taken care of, they're happy with that. So yeah, I definitely think education is a big factor and just overall awareness of what's out there.

Benjamin also acknowledged the Iraqi community's experience of downward mobility.

Upon their arrival, many Iraqi refugees find that the degrees and certifications they had earned in Iraq are not recognized in the United States. As a result they have difficulty returning to their career of choice. Recertification programs, while requiring a significant financial and time commitment, allow refugee professionals to return to their former occupations. Here, Benjamin talks the difficulty of recertification for refugee professionals:

What I observe and what I hear is that there is [sic] certain kinds of work that they will not do, that they have very strong feelings about that this job that's being offered is beneath them. And of course those who have professional degrees are naturally and understandably upset that there is no way for them to practice what they've trained in and what they've presumably practiced in their country back in Iraq. So they have a very high level of frustration. If you're gonna take somebody who was a dentist or a doctor or a full-scale nurse – a real RN or maybe even a practitioner, and say, 'Well you can't do this. In fact you can't do anything until you go back to school... and become recertified' – starting from scratch. And recertification is really difficult...so there's a lot of frustration – I know that.

I observed genuine empathy among the case workers who witnessed the frustrations of Iraqi refugees and who often felt helpless in aiding them. As Cameron, a refugee service provider at Opening Doors who recently finished his bachelor's degree at UC Davis, says, "We tend to see clients get really disheartened. You know, they realize with the job

market – especially right now – it’s hard, you know, for everybody... more so for refugees. Sometimes they get depressed about it... you know, it’s hard.” While it’s difficult to reconcile such a sympathetic response to the almost visceral rejection of Iraqis because of their alleged arrogance and ingratitude, the resettlement service providers I spoke with did ultimately want to see their clients achieve economic self-sufficiency through employment.

All the Iraqi refugees I interviewed expressed frustration with job-searching. Ali, who worked as an interpreter for the U.S. Army in Iraq, saw the formal requirements for employment in the United States as a major barrier:

It’s hard to get job here. This is my biggest disappointment, actually. Every time I find job online or something they have too much requirements... you need to have vehicle, driver’s license, you need to have GED. And I’m working to have all of them. I’m trying to work on them... there have to be some difficulties, you know.

Hussein, who has a master’s degree in English, assumed he would encounter some difficulty in finding employment but expected local NGOs to be more helpful in various aspects of the resettlement process, particularly job placement. He said, “It’s hard to find jobs these days. I even expected that before I come over here...but the thing that I wasn’t expecting...the organization is really not helping the refugees for a long time.” While many of the Iraqi refugees I spoke with characterized Opening Doors staff as “nice” and “trying to do their best,” they didn’t find all of the programs useful or designed for their particular needs, especially in regard to job placement.

A married couple in their 40’s, who I’ll refer to as Mahmood and Amira, had been in the U.S. just under 1 year during the time of our interview. Mahmood has an associate degree and A+ certification in computer science and was working as a computer

maintenance technician in Baghdad. His wife Amira earned a four-year bachelor's degree and was working as a school teacher until her school in Baghdad closed. She was then employed to do administrative work for an Iraqi firm that was loosely affiliated with the U.S. Army. Amira did not have any contact with Americans through her work but was repeatedly sent death threats from militia groups because of her employer's affiliation. The threats impacted Amira and her family so deeply that they fled to Cairo, Egypt where they were granted protection from the International Office of Migration (IOM). They stayed in Cairo for 5 years under a tourist visa that afforded them few rights and even fewer benefits. Finally, after applying to the UNHCR for asylum in the United States, and with the help of a family friend who was able to sponsor them, Mahmood, Amira and their 3 children arrived in Sacramento.

Still struggling to find employment after nearly a year, Mahmood and Amira were concerned about their ability to support their family and keep up with living expenses. They depended entirely on government aid for survival. The couple takes English classes but their English language skills are lacking and far below par for most local employers. Also, Mahmood's technical certificate is not recognized in the United States and he cannot afford a recertification program. The couple expressed desperation about their situation in the U.S. and said their experiences thus far had been "isolating."

Unfortunately, Mahmood and Amira's experience with prolonged unemployment is not a unique situation among Iraqi refugees in Sacramento. Sacramento residents, including recently-arrived refugees, are facing an unemployment rate of 12.9 percent, compared to the national average of 9.1 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). High unemployment rates, downward mobility among refugee professionals, and the difficulty



of recertification is leaving Iraqi refugees with few other choices than to join the growing ranks of the unemployed poor in Sacramento.

Conditions in Iraq deteriorated to the point that people with economic advantages at home chose to flee their country at the risk of losing social and economic status in the United States. This downward mobility, together with long-term unemployment and dependence on government assistance, contributes to Iraqis' feelings of discouragement. More 'traditional' refugees have dealt with economic hardship partly with in-group cohesion, a mechanism that does not seem to be available to Iraqi refugees in Sacramento. This absence has worsened their prospects and made official support even more pivotal. The following section will examine Iraqi refugees' carry over of internal divisions to the United States and how these internal fractures affect the prospect of a new Iraqi community in Sacramento.

### **Group Fragmentation**

Group fragmentation within the Iraqi population complicates the traditional resettlement process that relies on popular understandings of the refugee 'other' as a homogeneous group of people with similar needs. Even the federal government has already noticed some internal differentiation among the Iraqi population – the Special Immigrant Visa reflects this.

The assumption among resettlement case workers is that refugee groups foster a strong sense of intra-group cohesion and solidarity for themselves as a key mechanism of survival. In other words, it is expected that refugees stick together and help one another once they arrive in the United States. A big part of this assumption is based on previous patterns of refugee resettlement that follow the family reunification model. As one case

worker, Jessica, said in reference to the well-established Soviet population in Sacramento, “There’s a huge Slavic population and that was from the refugee population coming in and then bringing their families members in... [the] Slavic community had a fairly easy time unionizing and coming together.” Dissimilarly, most Iraqi arrivals in Sacramento come as free cases, without a family member or friend to sponsor them. They tend to arrive with a strong sense of individualism and self-autonomy, carry-overs from Iraq. As Ali, who had been in the U.S. for about 5 months, said, “I think we have to learn how to be, eh, independent. And we need to stand on our own feet by ourselves...we want to do everything by ourselves so that we face life, you know? To face our reality.”

Other carry-overs that Iraqi refugees bring with them to the United States include divisions along regional, religious, political and class lines that pose themselves as a challenge to service providers carrying out their work. As Maja, a case worker at Opening Doors, said:

Iraqis, there are different religious groups, like Sunni and Shiite. Even though most of them will tell you there is no problem – that they don’t have a problem being with someone from a different religion, it turns out that it can potentially become a big issue... sometimes we are forced to put 3 of them in a one-bedroom apartment. If they’re different religious groups, from my experience, it really doesn’t work out. I have to make sure they’re from the same groups so that they can live together.

This type of internal division also makes it more difficult for Iraqis to come together and support one another in the resettlement process. A Muslim Sunni respondent I’ll refer to as Muhammad openly acknowledged the fragmentation within the Iraqi community but felt it was less of an issue in the United States. He said, “Here I don’t find a problem... maybe because I never talked about this issue yet. [If I meet another Iraqi] I

won't ask him and he won't ask me [about religious orientation]." This is a sharp contrast to the mutual support seen among more 'traditional' refugee groups.

I was connected with Muhammad, a sophisticated and articulate man in his mid-30s, through a case worker at Opening Doors. He had been in the U.S. for 11 months and was still struggling to find employment during the time of our interview. He had earned a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering (his wife worked as a biologist in Baghdad), and in 2005 he began work with the International Republic Institute, an organization funded by the U.S. Republican Party to "forward democracy in Iraq." Muhammad's primary job was to "run election and voting workshops...and work to help my people through civil war [between Sunnis and Shiites]." He felt strongly about the Institute's philosophy and mission, and engaged in his own personal activism for bridging the Sunni-Shiite split in Iraq. He interacted with Americans at the institute but was careful to differentiate between Americans and American *soldiers*, emphasizing that he had very little contact with the U.S. military in Iraq. His personal ideology and ties to the U.S. made him an easy target for threats from militia groups. He applied for protection through the International Organization for Migration and with the help of a sponsor in Sacramento, was granted asylum in the U.S. for himself, his wife, and his preschool-aged daughter.

Group fragmentation within the Iraqi population was expressed by respondents through narratives of distrust and co-ethnic/national distancing. The first example, narratives of distrust, was especially prevalent among respondents who had previously worked for the U.S. Army. The contextual conditions of war and sectarian violence between the Sunni and Shiite in their native country have taught Iraqis not to trust other

Iraqis. Neighbors are pitted against neighbors, friends against friends. As Hakim, a former translator, said:

You'll try many things to find [if a person] is trustful or that you can't trust him at all. Especially in this kind of job the trust will be really important, so you don't trust anyone easy. And it'll take a long, long time.

Additionally, Hussein, the former supervising coordinator, spoke of the elusiveness of trust within his community due to corruption and the threat of violence in Iraq:

Basically... the majority of the people who was working with the Coalition Forces, they were under threat... militias and stuff in Iraq. Yeah. They [the militias] know us. Even the government, police officers and stuff... I can't trust anybody.

Such suspicion of co-ethnics/nationals has functioned as a mechanism of survival in Iraq. The majority of respondents who held employment with the U.S. government couldn't trust many people and felt the need to keep their work with the Coalition Forces a secret, even from family and close friends. As Hussein said, "We never know peoples' natures and stuff. If they know that, probably and deliberately they're going to mention my name to other people. That's gonna cause me trouble. So I'd rather avoid the situation by not telling them." Ali, a former interpreter, has not only kept his work a secret from his family but has kept his migration to the United States hidden as well, "I tell them I'm in Baghdad...they don't know this phone number is from the United States... it's not good... it puts me under stress." The 'importation' of mistrust is seen among Iraqi refugees in the United States and plays a role in explaining group fragmentation.

Not only did I hear about mistrust among Iraqis, but also between Iraqis and resettlement case workers in Sacramento, a spillover effect of their mistrust of the Iraqi government and authorities. Maja felt that gaining the trust of Iraqi refugees helped her ability to provide adequate services:

The biggest challenge is to build their trust...that trust. As soon as I'm able to gain that trust, everything pretty much goes smoothly... just imagine someone who just escaped a war, civil war, and there is a lot of mistrust in their own community. Me, a complete stranger, offering them help... it's gonna take time for them to see that I'm really here to help them out and that I'm not gonna hurt them and that they can turn to me for anything they need.

The distrust that was learned in Iraq as a mechanism of survival migrated with Iraqi refugees to the United States where it helps deepen social fragmentation and hinder a sense of group solidarity.

Iraqi refugees' own personal narratives of co-national distancing reveal the sociocultural rationality underlying the persistent reproduction of group fragmentation. Many respondents, especially those who had worked for the U.S. military, saw themselves as different from, and unwilling to associate with other Iraqis because of their level of education and emplaced American socialization before coming to the United States. The following quote from Ali illustrates this desire to disassociate with co-nationals:

I try to keep most things formal with them [other Iraqis]. I know the Iraqi culture and I just ... most of Iraqis are too behind. Some of them are really nice, some of them are sort of educated but they are not at the point where they are really, you know, an educated person. Not people that you can have relationship with them. For me, because I get mixed with the Americans for a long time, my mentality has become different from the other Iraqis. In a lot of things. Respect other people's privacy... you know, don't try to get involved in other people's business.

In addition to sociocultural differences, religiosity also appears to be a defining factor separating, dividing Iraqis into different groups. Ali also distanced himself from other Iraqis based on his secularism and he felt that he could not have a meaningful relationship with Iraqis who are religious. He added:

Anyone who talks about religion, I'm not interested. For me, I don't care about religion. I don't have religion, so... I found that the most people who become really close to me, they didn't care about religion, you know? But other people

who trying to tell me, ‘Why you don’t go to pray? Why, why, why?’ These people, they will never be my friends. I can say ‘hi’ to them, but absolutely they will never be my friends.

Overall, I observed a tendency among Iraqi Arab respondents to differentiate themselves from pan-Arabism by reasserting their own nationality (Iraqi), status (highly educated), and modernity (progressive thinking and secularism). The following quote from Hakim, an Iraqi refugee who identified himself as “Muslim but not religious,” shows how this process is articulated:

I hate the Arabs! They hate Iraqis. So I hate them in return. Iraq is better educational level. Classier than the Arabs. More educated people. And most of the Arabs, they jealous. Hate. And because of Saddam’s crazy, you know, they got the chance to humiliate the Iraqis.

Narratives of distrust and distancing oneself from co-nationals and co-ethnics were common manifestations of group fragmentation that emerged out of the data. Self-distancing in particular encourages a sense of individualism and discourages the move towards mutual assistance. These may work against a sense of group cohesion among Iraqi refugees and create a barrier to building a new community in Sacramento.

### **Prospects for Community Construction**

What does the future hold for the growing Iraqi refugee population in Sacramento? Despite their deep-seated segmentation, are there instances of Iraqis helping other Iraqis? Are community centers and mutual assistance associations (MAAs) developing in the area? Are narratives of solidarity and group unity beginning to emerge? Ultimately, will Iraqis be able to build a new community for themselves in light of the class, race, regional and religious lines that divide them? Or will this population become a unique case of total amalgamation, the maximum level of assimilation, into U.S. society without ever forming an Iraqi community?

Despite their ingrained fragmentation, I found a longing for community and unity among Iraqis in Sacramento. Hussein highlighted how segmentation was a problem in his community and felt they should try to work past it in order to help one another. He said:

We came from different places in Iraq and our ethnicities are kinda different... and religions sometimes are different... the family where you came from is different. These differences [are] causing these problems... [we] got to be living in harmony – instead of having problems with each other, helping each other!

Local resettlement workers felt that with time Iraqi refugees in Sacramento would begin to support one another in the resettlement process despite their differences. As Cameron, a case worker, said, “It takes some time to realize that they’re all the same in the United States – they’re refugees from Iraq and that’s the bottom line.” Maja voiced similar sentiments about the need for Iraqi refugees to acknowledge a sense of commonality and unity:

You know, they’re all here for the same reasons no matter what religion, what country they’re coming from. They’re here because they want to – they need to – start a new life. Those grudges that they have, wherever they come from, have to stay there for their own well-being. And we’re not in the position to babysit, we can’t, you know, make them forget about those grudges. We can tell them that they don’t have to love each other, they don’t have to be best friends but they do have to respect each other as people that are starting over. Really, we try to put it in the light where it is to their benefit to do so. The more people that they have around them, supporting them, behind them, the better they’re gonna do. Those similarities that they do have – they may have a different religion but they have the same language, they have a lot of the same culture... and even when they get off the plane they’re really specific about [differentiating between] Sunni/Shiite but give it a couple months and they realize that they’re in it together and things change really quickly. They realize nobody, or very few Americans...is gonna ask ‘what religion?’ You know. It’s kind of them against the world versus them against each other.

The impetus toward the conformation of a community with common interests connecting Iraqis above and beyond their internal divisions seems to be emerging. In the course of my fieldwork two new Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs) were

mentioned, namely, the Mesopotamia Association and the Arab American Learning Center.

The Mesopotamia Association was founded in San Jose by Iraqi refugees to help other Iraqi refugees and immigrants “understand, assimilate and succeed through access to professional and educational resources” (mesaca.org). The goal of this MAA is to support Iraqis in all aspects of their transition to life in the United States. During the course of my research, a new chapter of the Mesopotamia Association opened in Sacramento. I attended the grand opening at the Citrus Heights Community Center in March, 2011. There were approximately 100 men, women, and children in attendance, mostly Iraqis but also some local refugee service providers from Opening Doors and the International Rescue Committee (IRC). I recognized a number of Iraqi refugee who were clients from Opening Doors. There was loud Arabic music playing on portable speakers while guests trickled into the bright community room and gazed with anticipation at the expansive food spread laid out in the corner of the room. Tables and chairs were set up in long rows across the room. Tables were blanketed in clean white plastic tablecloths and adorned with colorful spring-time flowers in short glass vases. At the front of the room was a long table for the Board of Directors, adorned with several miniature Iraqi and American flags. Once guests got settled, the music was turned off and the Executive Director gave a speech in Arabic. The son of one of the board members, a tall and kindly man in his early 30s, translated for those of us who didn’t speak Arabic. The speech touched on a number of topics, from getting refugees more involved in American culture and society, to supporting Iraqis with medical problems. The Director also acknowledged the work of local service providers in aiding recent Iraqi arrivals in Sacramento. He



highlighted the need for specific programming, namely cultural orientation classes, financial literacy programs and small business loans. Lastly, he urged for the establishment of a stable Iraqi community, noting that the long-term success of Iraqis in the U.S. would come from working with one another.

The Arab American Learning Center (AALC) was referenced to me by the ODI staff and director. When I went to search for it online, I was linked directly to the Arabic Church of Sacramento. I inquired with one of the ODI case workers about this connection and she told me that the AALC was established by an Iraqi Christian pastor, a refugee who had come through ODI several years ago. When I asked Benjamin, the Director of ODI about the AALC, he said:

It's a very Christian Iraqi group and they started an association. They say it's open to all Iraqis but I think they make a differentiation that you're a Christian Iraqi as opposed to being a Muslim of some sort. Or you're secular Iraqi, and there certainly are some secular Iraqis around. But they have started something and exactly how it's helping people... I don't know. I made a real effort at one point to get them interested in us but I never heard back.

I heard mixed opinions about the Arab Center from Iraqi respondents. Most of the Iraqis from the Opening Doors focus group (Feb. 2011) said they didn't feel comfortable going to the AALC because of religious differences. In contrast, Muhammad, a Muslim Sunni respondent found the AALC open and welcoming despite religious differences. He said:

Yes I went to them many times. They are very good, very good people. They never ask me about anything [regarding ethnicity/religion], they help me and... [host] many activities for Iraqi refugees. But they never ask about anything...our name look Arabic and Muslim so when I talk with her [staff person at the AALC] she knows I'm a Muslim and she's a Christian but she never asks me about it.

While the Mesopotamia Association and the Arab American Learning Center are seemingly focused on building mutual assistance and community among Iraqi refugees in the Sacramento area, a third organization has recently emerged that may serve to

encourage the opposite, that is, intra-group fragmentation. The Shiite Center is an informal but closed organization in the Arden Arcade area of Sacramento. According to Muhammad, the Shiite Center is dedicated to promoting Shiite Islam thought and principles. It seems the center is focused on religious practice but may also serve as a mutual assistance association of sorts. Muhammad, who identifies as Sunni felt the Shiite Center served to emphasize sectarian divisions and conflict, saying:

They open a new center, a Shiite center. ... I don't like that because we don't need to have this [sectarian] problem between us. We just say 'Iraqi' and that's it. I'd like it to be called Iraqi Center not Shiite Center – that would be better for all Iraqis. We don't want that problem to get bigger and bigger. The name, I don't like it. My friend asked me to go but I don't want to because I don't like the name. Iraqi Center would be very good, a place people want to go.

Muhammad and several other refugee respondents expressed concern that the sectarian problems in Iraq could repeat themselves in their new home of Sacramento.

It is difficult to say if the problems of division are constructed more as inertia to be overcome or as active and growing forces to be feared and perhaps countered. Will there be more sectarianism or more communitarianism/nationalism and group solidarity in the future? It will require time to allow these different forces to develop (or not), and further longitudinal investigation to know how the Iraqi refugee community will continue to take shape.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions and Policy Implications**

What is Iraqis' mode of incorporation into the United States? What is their relationship with local service providers? How are Iraqi refugees, both individually and collectively, responding to each other and to the context of their reception in the United States? I gained a unique insight into these questions through my research. I will highlight three of my most important findings to help further our understanding of this specific case study: 1) emplaced sociocultural migration, 2) resettlement mismatch, and 3) intra-group conflict, distrust and fragmentation. These findings illuminate the larger picture of the conditions, prospects and problems of the 'contemporary' refugee and how the policy expectations of refugees' needs, based on 'traditional' constructions of the refugee, are oversimplified and outmoded.

### **Emplaced Sociocultural Migration**

Many Iraqis had socially and culturally migrated, and to some extent assimilated to American society, before they had actually moved physically to the United States. Working for the U.S. government in Iraq created a complex space for social and cultural exchanges between Iraqi employees and the American military and civilian population via personal and professional relationships. Therefore, many Iraqis arrived in the U.S. as refugees who already had a deep understanding of American culture, systems and structures. This emplaced social migration also provided them with significant social capital – connections to Americans who can help them find jobs, housing and access to other resources. This seems to coincide with Wolf's (1997) research on Filipinos who also experienced sociocultural migration into American culture and society while still in their native country, including their education, a hold-over from American involvement.

While both groups were exposed to American culture prior to migration, the Iraqi experience is different because of the political context (a complicated war situation between Iraq and the U.S. that has global, regional, national and local dimensions). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Iraqi refugees aren't the only ones who've found themselves in this position, nor probably be the last.

From my data I can conclude that emplaced sociocultural migration via employment with U.S. contractors in Iraq probably has significant implications for the resettlement experience of recently arrived Iraqi refugees. Primarily, it facilitates incorporation into American society. As mentioned previously, it facilitates the process of incorporation as those refugees who worked for the U.S. military have stronger English language abilities and a greater understanding of American culture and customs. As many of the Iraqi interpreters interviewed said, they didn't feel like strangers in this country upon their arrival. But while it eases their incorporation into the U.S., emplaced social migration also drives up Iraqi refugees' expectations of the resettlement process and the services and resources they are entitled to. This creates a tense relationship with local service providers who perceive Iraqis as being 'too demanding' or difficult to work with. This clash stands as a limitation, as Iraqi refugees are less likely to participate in resettlement NGO programming that they feel is mismatched to their specific needs.

Moreover, emplaced sociocultural migration tends to complicate Iraqi refugees' identity formation. It seems to be particularly hard for Iraqi refugees who were employed by the U.S. military in Iraq to know where they stand and where they belong, not only because of their displacement, but because of the complex geopolitics between Iraq and the United States in which their displacement is embedded. In other words, are they

friends or enemies? In a sense, the new Iraqi refugee finds himself frozen in time. *He* is perceived as a traitor in Iraq for aligning himself with the invader, yet in American eyes he is part of the enemy camp. He fits the enemy prototype constructed and reinforced by public officials, news media, and popular culture – the brown Islamic extremist or the “treacherous” Arab terrorist – yet he has been socialized as an American (Steuter & Wills, 2010, p.259). He is stuck in limbo, neither here nor there.

Emplaced sociocultural migration also affects their relations with less assimilated co-nationals. Those Iraqis who did not work for the U.S. Army and did not have the opportunity to build relationships with Americans could not participate in the same significant cultural exchanges prior to migrating. Thus, once in the U.S. they are ‘lagging’ behind other Iraqi refugees that are more socially/culturally comfortable and have a better command of the English language. Although both groups are generally ‘contemporary’ – highly educated, middle-class, urban professionals – emplaced sociocultural migrants feel superior and different because of their position and advanced level of assimilation to U.S. society. This reinforces pressures for social division and fragmentation within the Iraqi refugee population. Current policies aren’t fine-grained enough to deal with these specific differences or the dynamics between these two subgroups.

### **Resettlement Mismatch**

New Iraqi refugees challenge the constructed notion of ‘traditional’ refugees. Because they are generally urban, middle-class, educated professionals, they do not match the perception of political refugees as rural, poor, uneducated and disempowered. Iraqis display high levels of agency because of their socioeconomic status and level of

education as well as their experience of sociocultural migration. They have high expectations of local resettlement agencies and thus are often disappointed with the services they are offered. Similarly, refugee resettlement case workers find it extremely difficult to provide the right services for Iraqis. The service providers in Sacramento consistently described their work with Iraqi refugees as “challenging.” They often compared Iraqi refugees to more ‘traditional’ refugee clients, such as Bhutanese/Nepalese groups that they described as “easier” to work with and “more appreciative” of resettlement programming and services. Local case workers understood the socioeconomic downward mobility Iraqi refugees experienced in Sacramento but they lacked a general awareness of Iraqis’ socio-political history. One practical solution for addressing this issue would be to initiate a cultural competency training program designed specifically for local service providers that work with Iraq refugees. The program would need to encourage local NGOs to have at least one Arabic-speaking employee on staff to help bridge the linguistic and cultural gaps that currently exist between refugees and service providers.

The Iraqi refugees are not the only group to experience tension and conflict with resettlement NGO workers. The Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union that Steven Gold studied (1995) had a similar experience upon their arrival in California. Coming from a communist state where nearly every aspect of life was controlled by the government, they came to the United States with high expectations that differentiated them from other migrant groups. Soviet Jews were more prepared than ‘traditional’ refugees to adjust to American life because of their level of education, professional training and urban experiences. Similar to the Iraqi case study, Soviet Jews experienced

status degradation; because of their skill and education levels they were less willing to accept jobs in the U.S. that they considered beneath them. Also like Iraqis, they struggled to navigate the American job market and experienced difficulty in finding desirable employment. Frustration around job placement and other services created clashes between Soviet Jews and resettlement agencies as well as among American Jews who had fought so hard to get these Jews released from the former U.S.S.R. Subsequently, service providers and American Jews alike perceived Soviet Jews as entitled. Conflict also revolved around clashes in attitude, norms, values, and ways of doing things, what Gold terms “cultural socialization” (1995, p. 111). Their situation today is prosperous, marked by economic success. Soviet Jews are highly assimilated into American society and they have created their own organizations that embrace their particular brand of Jewishness (Zeltzer-Zubida, 2004). We can only speculate about the possibility of something similar happening for Iraqi refugees, in time. We may see parallel patterns emerge for secular Iraqis who want to move away from preexisting religious division and conflict by creating mutual assistance organizations that will facilitate their group’s economic success and upward mobility.

The issue of resettlement mismatch highlights the larger gap between the expectations of ‘contemporary’ refugees and existing policy programs designed for a homogeneous group of people with similar needs. Resettlement NGOs would benefit from cultural competency training and an evaluation of whether current programming meets the needs of Iraqis and other ‘nontraditional’ refugee groups.

### **Conflict, Distrust and Social Fragmentation**

Traditional group solidarity models state that hostile environments engender a strong sense of intra-group cohesion and solidarity as a key mechanism of survival. This isn't true for all groups. In fact, the exact opposite condition has manifested for Iraqis. In this community there is a great level of group fragmentation and mistrust between members. Sources of mistrust include class, ethnicity, region of origin, and religion. The contextual conditions of war, geopolitics, and government action (or inaction) have also discouraged a sense of group unity and cohesion. In this case, one might think that Iraqi refugees' common nationality would urge a sense of group belonging among members. One might also assume that the conflict/war from which they fled would introduce a common point of identification and group cohesion. Instead, we see a community fragmented by co-ethnic/national distancing, narratives of mistrust, segmentation and strong individualism. In most instances, segmentation along ethnic, religious and class lines has not acted as a barrier to certain types of community formation, such as in the development of mutual assistance associations like the Mesopotamia Association and the Arab American Learning Center. In other instances sectarian groups such as those who organize the Shiite Center have worked against a unified Iraqi community in Sacramento. I was surprised to find the depth of distrust and some of the mainstream distaste for religiosity among Iraqi respondents, but when placed in the context of the civil war, when sectarian mass murder became common and thousands were killed on the basis of their religious sect along, it is not surprising at all. This context helps to explain the tendency towards secularism and general aversion to any organization that reinforced religious differences.



Other migrant groups have demonstrated similar patterns of intra-group fragmentation in the face of a hostile context of reception. Menjivar (2000) found fragmented social networks among Salvadorian migrants in the United States. Guarnizo, et al. (1999) noticed pronounced individualism and mistrust among Colombian migrants in New York City and Los Angeles. Meanwhile, Gold (1995) observed a high level of in-group distancing among Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union in California. This shows that the Iraqi group is part of a larger phenomenon, with larger implications and consequences.

### **Research Implications and Recommendations**

The State plays a major role in regulating and creating identities, people and communities. Such labeling is not simplistic or clear-cut because migrant groups have agency. For example, Iraqi refugees dislike the label 'refugee' (ODI Focus Group Data, 2011). They associate the term with failure and a need for help, and connect it with Afghans and Palestinians living in refugee camps, something most Iraqis have no experience with (Sassoon, 2009). Iraqis, instead, consider themselves to be in 'exile'. Certainly, most of the Iraqis I interviewed didn't see themselves as refugees per se and updated resettlement models should reflect this experience. Given that there is no 'proto-refugee' for which one resettlement model fits all, how can the resettlement model be restructured to better assist Iraqis and other 'nontraditional' refugees?

Socio-economic class, English proficiency, levels of education and professionalism, and urban experiences and should be taken into account when resettlement programs are being designed and implemented. For example, in response to the downward mobility that professional Iraqis experience, several possible solutions

present themselves. First, refugee case workers have characterized Iraqis as having an “entrepreneurial spirit” who might benefit more from microfinance/small business loans than job placement programs. Second, free or affordable recertification programs (much like the services Arab American Learning Center provides) would aid professional Iraqi refugees with finding relevant and fulfilling work. Third, vocational-specific English training rather than traditional ESL (English as Second Language) classes would be more beneficial for Iraqis, many of whom are already proficient in English. Finally, Iraqi community networks, not only through mutual assistance associations (MAAs) but also through media, need to be initiated. There is no Arabic radio in the greater Sacramento area, and while there is a local Jordanian newspaper in print, it doesn’t focus on refugee-specific resources and experiences. These are all strategic, small-scale alternatives that would not require sweeping changes.

Further research on post-2003 Iraqi refugees in the U.S. needs to be implemented as part of a broader effort to better understand how the larger experience of the ‘contemporary’ refugee is shaped by traditional resettlement policies. The implications of this could be an entirely new resettlement model geared to aid the incorporation of educated, middle- and upper-class professional refugees in a way that’s beneficial to both the refugee group and the host society.

It is important to focus more attention on this matter for two reasons. First, the Iraqi special case may be seen as representatives of all ‘contemporary’ refugees who are likely to come to the U.S. and encounter similar difficulties. The United States is likely to see an increasing arrival of ‘contemporary’ refugees due to the geopolitical situations in which the U.S. is increasingly involved. Second, the Iraqi special case may represent all

others who might contemplate assisting U.S. forces in the future, or not. If this case study as a representation becomes better understood, we can incorporate migrant and refugee populations that could contribute socially, economically, politically and culturally to our current society. Also, the eventual formation of transnational communities could bridge political and cultural gaps between global regions, individual nations, and even localized communities.

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**Appendix A: Iraqi Respondent Face Sheet**

Face Sheet #:

Date:

Time:

Location:

*Please answer the following demographic questions:*

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Where is your family from? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your marital status? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is the highest educational degree you have completed?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What is your national identity? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What is your religious identity? \_\_\_\_\_
8. What is your ethnic identity? \_\_\_\_\_
9. What was your date of arrival to the U.S.?  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Iraqi Respondent Interview Guide

Exploratory Interview Schedule, V1

Case Number: \_\_\_\_\_

1. *Tell me about yourself.*
  - a. What is your National identity? Religious identity? Ethnic identity?
    - i. How have these identities shaped your life experiences?
    - ii. How have these identities changed since your relocation to the US?
  - b. What is your political orientation?
    - i. How has this identity shaped your life experiences?
    - ii. How has it changed since the start of the war?
    - iii. Has it changed since your relocation to the US?
  
2. *Tell me about the most recent work you did in Iraq.*
  - a. Where was this job located?
  - b. How/why did you get this job?
  - c. What did you like and dislike about this job?
  - d. What skills made you qualified for this job?
  - e. What type of training did you receive and from whom?
  - f. How much did this job pay?
    - i. How did this wage compare to other wages in Iraq at the time?
  - g. Did friends and family know about your work? *If not, why?*
  - h. Who did you work with?
    - i. What were your relationships like?
  
3. *Tell me about the process of coming to the United States.*
  - a. How/why did you decide to come to the US? To Sacramento?
    - i. Did you have any say in this placement?
  - b. What/who initiated the process?
  - c. What steps were taken?
  - d. How long did the process take?
  - e. Did you stay in any other countries while transitioning from Iraq to the US?
    - i. What was that experience like?
    - ii. How were you perceived?
    - iii. How were you treated?
  - f. Tell me about any conflicting feelings you had about leaving.
  
4. *Tell me about being labeled a 'refugee' in the United States.*
  - a. Do you consider yourself a 'refugee'? Why or why not?
  - b. What does having 'refugee status' mean?
    - i. How does the meaning change depending on where you are (US, Iraq, other countries)?
    - ii. What resources/services do you have access to as a 'refugee'?
    - iii. What resources/services are you denied as a 'refugee'?
  - c. Do you have a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV)? *If yes, probe the following:*
    - i. How did you find out about SIVs?
    - ii. How did you obtain SIV status?

- iii. What is the SIV process like?
  - iv. How is SIV status different from regular refugee status?
  - v. What resources do you have access to that 'regular' refugees do not have access to?
  - vi. How does being an SIV impact your relationships with other Iraqis refugees?
5. *Tell me about your recent experiences in United States.*
- a. Have your experiences met your expectations? Why or why not?
  - b. Tell me about instances of racism/discrimination you've witnessed or experienced.
  - c. What have been some of your greatest surprises thus far? Some of your greatest disappointments/challenges?
  - d. What does it mean/how does it feel to be an Iraqi in the United States?
  - e. How do you think you are perceived in the US?
  - f. Tell me about your relationships with 'Americans'.
  - g. Tell me about your relationships with other Iraqis in the US.
6. *Tell me about your relationships with refugee service providers.*
- a. How did you initially get in touch with Church World Service?
  - b. What has your experience been like with Opening Doors (ODI)?
    - i. What services have they provided to you?
    - ii. What services do they not provide that you wished they did?
    - iii. What have your interactions with ODI staff and volunteers been like?
    - iv. Are your cultural values, norms and traditions taken into account at ODI?
    - v. What suggestions would you give for improvement?
  - c. Have you worked with other refugee service providers in the area?  
*Probe for IRC and Bach Viet.*
    - i. How have your experiences with them compared to your experiences with ODI?
7. *Tell me about your plans for the future.*
- a. How do you feel about staying in Sacramento?
    - i. Tell me about things that are going well for you here.
    - ii. Tell me about struggles you are having here.
  - b. How do you feel about the prospect of returning to Iraq?
  - c. What are your plans for reuniting with family and friends?
8. *Conclusion*
- a. Is there anything else you want to say that I didn't ask you about?
  - b. Do you have any questions for me?
  - c. Do you know any Iraqi refugees who are willing to participate in this interview?

## Appendix C: Refugee Service Provider Interview Guide

Exploratory Interview Schedule, V2

Case Number: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Briefly tell me about what you do at the organization.
2. Tell me about the organization's structure.
  - a. What's the relationship between Church World Service and Opening Doors?
  - b. What's the relationship between this VOLAG and the IOM?
3. Tell me about the populations you work with.
  - a. Do you feel like the demographic is pretty typical in this area? Or is this specific to Opening Doors?
4. Tell me about working with the Iraqis.
  - a. What are their general characteristics?
  - b. How are they similar or different from other refugee populations?
  - c. How does their experience compare to other populations that come through your organization?
5. How many Iraqi refugees come through your organization that worked for the United States?
  - a. How are they different from the Iraqi refugees coming in who *didn't* work for the U.S. in Iraq?
6. Tell me about internal conflicts within the Iraqi refugee community.
  - a. How do these internal divisions affect the work your organization does?
  - b. How do you navigate these divisions?
  - c. Do see them start to move past these divisions on their own? How – in what way?
7. Do you know about the relationship between older refugees who came, maybe ten years ago, versus the refugees coming now?
8. Tell me a little bit about the gender dynamics of the Iraqi refugees.
  - a. Do you ever resettle women who worked for the U.S. government in Iraq?
9. How would you rate your organization's cultural awareness of Iraqis? Of Arabs?
  - a. Is there any kind of cultural training that ODI staff participate in?
10. What is your organization's weakest point when it comes to working with Iraqis?
  - a. What's your biggest challenge in working with the Iraqi population?
  - b. What could you do better, or what needs to be changed or improved?
  - c. How will your work with Iraqis inform possible future work with other refugee populations?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to say? Anything important that I didn't ask you about?