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## **In the Aftermath of Terror: Iraqi Refugees, Loss, and Life in Contemporary California**

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### **Preface**

This paper is part of a larger ethnographic research effort that I undertook for my senior honors thesis about the aftermath of the Iraq war as defined by the experiences of American veterans and Iraqi refugees in the United States. The research on which this study is based derives from a full year of participant observation, group discussions, and individual qualitative interviews with 13 Iraqi refugees of the former professional class that relocated to northern California after 2003 and, separately, with 13 American veterans of the war who are pursuing higher education at a competitive university, also in northern California. While I argue that the aftermath as a whole can only be understood through the perspectives of both, narratives from within each group are also uniquely insightful. This paper is thus a modified version of one chapter of my thesis and focuses on the drastic change in opportunity that the Iraqi refugees experienced.

### **Introduction**

The United Nation in Syria... told us, you going to go to the United States of America. I told them, I have not very good background with the United States, because I just run away from them, from what happened in my country... They told me, it's not your choice. United States, or go back to Baghdad.  
—Mustafa, Iraqi refugee (California, 2011)

On September 11, 2001, foreign terrorists hijacked planes inside the U.S. and crashed them into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Thousands of people were killed, the Twin Towers were destroyed, and the American public was deeply shocked. Within a month of the 9/11 attacks, President Bush and his cabinet used the ensuing wave of American outrage, national pride, and international sympathy to initiate a war in Afghanistan. Two years later, they brought on the invasion of Iraq under the related claims that Saddam Hussein harbored terrorist forces and weapons of mass destruction. The American media devoted prime-time coverage to the American military offensive against Iraq in March of 2003 but, as time passed, the 'war on terror' dragged on and became an uneasy norm in American consciousness.

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While the general public lost interest in the topic, a number of distinguished scholars including Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002), Abu Lughod (2002), Khalidi (2004) and Al-Ali (2007) have published works on the “controlling processes” behind the war on terror (Nader 1997). Their scholarship analyzes how U.S. interventions in politics in Iraq and Afghanistan under the pretense of promoting democracy and women’s rights were in many ways furthering a colonialist agenda of profit and power at the expense of the countries’ nationals and, with 9/11, at the expense of the American people as well. Their work creates the backdrop for my own research on the repercussions of the war on the lives of Iraqi refugees and American veterans.

Looking into the history that led up to the 2003 war, we find two decades of international influence in Iraq to try neutralize the country’s nuclear capabilities, as well as a growing propensity among American leaders to provoke a regime change. When Saddam Hussein’s army invaded Kuwait in 1990, the U.N. imposed economic sanctions on Iraq through Resolutions 678 and 661 to encourage Saddam Hussein to cooperate with the weapons inspections (Al-Ali 2007). The sanctions had tragic effects among the general Iraqi population, but had little impact on the actions of Saddam Hussein. The U.N. requested that the United States intervene with military force to end Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait, resulting in the Gulf War of 1991. By the following year, U.N. inspections relayed that Saddam Hussein had likely disarmed most of the country’s arsenals, but later inspections cast some doubt as to the level of the country’s compliance with a thorough inspection. In response to the U.N. report, in 1998 President Bill Clinton authorized a stream of air strikes against various military and government targets in Iraq. At the same time, the U.S. congress passed the “Iraq Liberation Act,” which proposed support for the deposition of Saddam Hussein and the development of a democracy in Iraq (Gregory 2004; Makiya 1998; Tripp 2000). Meanwhile, the U.S. was also engaged in covert actions in neighboring Arab countries that provoked Osama Bin Laden to call for an end to the U.S. and Western colonialist interventions in the Arab and Muslim world (Mahle 2004). Following the September 11th attacks in 2001, President Bush announced the “War on Terror” that would locate and destroy all terrorist masterminds connected to the tragedy, including the suspected masterminds, al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden, as well as any countries that harbored suspected terrorists.

Of the millions of Iraqis displaced by the war, more than 39 thousand refugees resettled in the United States after 2003 (ORR 2011), but there is little research on their individual experiences. Approximately eight thousand moved to California, nearly five thousand moved to Michigan, and the rest were dispersed in other states. The majority of those who relocated to the U.S. holds advanced degrees and had respected careers before the war (GAO 2010), but there is a dearth of research about how the conflict uniquely affected their lives as professionals. This paper focuses on the aftermath experiences of Iraqi refugees of the former professional class who resettled in California. I argue that a defining feature of that aftermath for these refugees was a drastic loss, which I describe as personal, professional, and status-based. The personal loss involves family members, friends, fluency with local culture, geographical affiliations, and possessions, most of which they were forced to leave behind. The professional loss includes their degrees, jobs and careers, which were no longer valid or accessible in California. Lastly, the loss of status relates to their having once held respected positions in Iraqi society with access

to upward mobility, only to find themselves in some of the lowest strata in California. I examine this cumulative loss by analyzing the opportunities available to them as professionals before 2003, how the war disrupted and redefined those possibilities, and how the refugees navigated that loss. I conclude with a reflection on the normalization of the Iraqi war.

### **Prewar Professionals**

Saddam Hussein was a controlling ruler, to the effect that the population had few rights to free speech and limited individual choice. However, as the ruler of the socialist Ba'ath Party, he also encouraged economic growth by improving the quality and accessibility of education throughout the country (Al-Ali 2007; Makiya 1998). All of the Iraqis in this study were invested in their lives as professionals and members of the educated class. Obtaining a quality education through the level of the university was a vital component of their lives and a primary requirement for their children's lives. Despite the repercussions of the sanctions and Saddam Hussein's dominating rule, the vast majority was very satisfied with the available opportunities.

Zeinab<sup>1</sup> was satisfied with the life she led as a laboratory technician at Baghdad University before the war. Her path to becoming a professional was typical of the Iraqis in this study. She was born in the 1980s and raised in an upper class, urban neighborhood. She studied in the free programs that the government provided for all Iraqis from elementary school through college, and, like most, her parents hoped she would become a doctor or engineer. Access to a degree in those fields required a score of at least 95% on the secondary school placement exam, but Zeinab's score was well below that. Rather than attending the College of Medicine or Engineering as she had hoped, she was instead directed to enroll in the College of Agriculture.

Just one choice, yeah—agriculture.... At first I didn't like to go, yeah. Agriculture. Because everyone in my family said 'Oh, you'll be a farmer?' (*Laughs.*) Yeah, I didn't like it, but when I start to attend the classes, take microbiology, biotechnology, yeah—I like.

Despite her initial reservations, she excelled in her studies and enjoyed the material. After graduating in 2001, she became a technician in the labs at her college and prepared slides for the new students, just as previous assistants had done for her. The work appealed to her. She was pleased with the direction of her life, and was even more invested as her college sweetheart began to court her.

Mustafa, similarly, described life in Iraq before 2003 as "very good." He was born in the early 1970s and earned a degree in engineering from the University of Baghdad. Despite previous wars with Iran and Kuwait, the restrictive embargo, and the complex politics of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party, Mustafa said that at that time "we still [had] a high quality job, so we have a very good life... Even, we have Saddam Hussein or the dictators, we don't have the democracies—but you know, when you are not a politics [sic], nobody can hurt you." By 2003, he had developed a successful, private engineering business of 12 years, owned his home, had a growing deposit of

savings, and enjoyed his free time with his wife, Noor, and their first child.

Another Iraqi refugee, Karwan, was born several years after Mustafa, in the late 1970s. He was one of several in this study to relate to me his dissent with the Ba'ath Party, but, like the rest, he was fully invested in his life as a professional. His parents disagreed with the government's politics and so they ran a private business that served local needs of their community rather than answering to the government. Karwan grew up aspiring to succeed, similarly, without capitulating to the demands of the Ba'ath Party. "For me and all my family, we were never ever involved in politician [sic] in any way. We just wanted to be like normal, civil people living in their city, that's it." At nine years old, he discovered an aptitude and love for English while listening to music in the language. His skills later secured him a position within the Iraqi government when, a year after his college graduation and with an English degree in hand, he applied to work as an assistant to high-ranking officials specializing in imports. Applicants were required to be Ba'athists, but, Karwan said,

My gift in English helped me... That was the only qualification I had back that time, that I'm speaking English, and they wanted someone who speaks English. Yeah, it worked out. And it was the only thing that they were looking for! And, actually [...it was also] mandatory to be in a certain level in the Arab Ba'ath Socialists Party—.

Although he refused to join the ranks, his aptitude for English was so valuable that the hiring officials forged documents framing him as an active member of the Party and then offered him the job. Although the work was ultimately quite simple, Karwan was thrilled with the opportunity and enjoyed his job. However, after only one year, the director was suddenly forced to dismiss him for unexplained reasons. Karwan presumes the change was due to higher officials suspecting his falsified Ba'athist connections. He had already proven himself a valuable employee so the director moved him instead to a less visible position in the company, where he continued to use his English skills and enjoyed further expanding his knowledge of imports and various government affairs. Unlike most of the Iraqis in this study, despite his secure, well-paying job, he and his wife found themselves looking for more from life. They were living under a dictatorship where, according to his wife, Nadia, "the walls were listening." Even in their home they would not openly discuss their opinions about the regime for fear of arrest or torture. Karwan describes himself as ever searching for new challenges and he feared a future that was as intellectually restricted as his father's and as that of his grandfather before him. The war would bring liberation from the regime but it would also devastate the country's infrastructure, elicit an enormous humanitarian crisis of displaced people, and cause drastic changes in the lives of those in this study.

### **An Unexpected War**

Access to the outside world was very limited during the reign of Saddam Hussein. Cell phones and satellite dishes were banned, international mail did not always arrive at its destination, and the government controlled all news sources in the country, so there was

limited information about the likelihood of a war. An Iraqi woman named Huda was living in Baghdad but she had extended family living abroad that called to warn her that the U.S. was likely to invade. “Our media doesn’t say anything about it... Everybodies calls from the outside, ‘There’s gonna be a war, they gonna attack you, we are seeing the missiles, the *bowachir*—the navy, they’re moving to the area....’ So it’s going to be definitely war. But when, nobody decides.” By January, it was obvious that war was imminent. Huda left Baghdad and moved temporarily to Syria with her husband, children and her parents. “On March the war started, but we left in January because we were so scared.” Her loss of safety was the first of many losses that she endured because of the war, beginning even before the American military officially asserted its presence in the country.

Most of the others were unable to leave the country. Karwan and Nadia, too, heard rumors of the invasion and watched as the Iraqi army set up base in a grassy field mere blocks away. In March, the couple stopped going to work because they were afraid, like Huda, that an invasion would catch them unaware. They had nowhere to escape for safety except inside their house, so they stayed home, playing games and sleeping late to pass the time. On the night of March 20th, 2003, they heard the first bombs fall on Baghdad. The following night, they woke to a deafening canon of explosions and a steady rain of shrapnel on their roof. Karwan described their panic.

We woke up on that sound. All what we did, we didn’t even look at each other. We just hold each other hands and we decided to stay in our bed in case we will be burnt out, somebody will realize that this is our room and this is our corpse. Can you imagine when you wake up with this feeling? The first feeling in the morning?... And we don’t even know, yeah, is our family still alive? Is there anybody outside in the street?

Later, when the explosions and eerie clatter of falling debris quieted in the early hours of the morning, they ventured outside to discover smoldering pieces of metal embedded throughout the neighborhood. The devastation led to the carcass of an Iraqi military truck stationed in the neighborhood that had been filled with anti-aircraft missiles. The truck had evidently been targeted and bombed in the night by one of the American or British planes it was meant to destroy, wreaking havoc in the surrounding residential neighborhood. Karwan and Nadia’s chilling acceptance of impending death in the face of unpredictable explosions became a new way of life. The fear was shared by all Iraqis in this study and lasted much beyond the initial U.S. military offensive, later extending itself as various manifestations of trauma in the war’s aftermath in California.

Karwan and Nadia survived physically unscathed but many in this study related stories of death and injury among friends and family members. Mustafa described how his wife’s brother was killed by American troops on the first day of the war as he returned home from work.

What happened in Iraq after the occupation for American troops in 2003, they came and they destroyed. They—at the first time they shooting everywhere. By the way, my brother-in-law [was] killed at the first day, the first three hours

from the war, he just killed without any reason. Just tried to come back home, and they just shooting on any moving thing on the street. Just 27 years old, and he has three kids.

According to Noor, her brother disliked Saddam Hussein. He lost his life at the hands of the military whose objective to remove Saddam Hussein from power caused countless Iraqi fatalities. The total numbers remain unknown but estimates as of 2011 would place the death toll above 125,000 (Crawford 2011).

In May of 2003, despite the imminent escalation of violence and the accompanying deterioration of national stability, President Bush announced the end of major combat operations and declared the offensive a success. Life slowly continued in Iraq but the country was functioning well below its prewar levels, with only a few hours of electricity each day, the drinking water contaminated, and everyday activities like buying groceries suffused with stress. Many businesses that had successfully operated in Iraq before the war closed due to poor security and scarce resources. The American military was one of the few remaining sources of stable employment.

At that time, Huda and her family returned from Syria to their home in Baghdad. She found a job through the American military to help restore the city by rehabilitating facilities and reestablishing programs that the war destroyed. The job was unrelated to Huda's degree in surveying, but she had prior experience as a secretary at an engineering company and the capacity to communicate well in English, so she was well qualified for the position. She managed timesheets, supplies, healthcare disbursements, and paycheck distribution for the organization's employees in and around Baghdad. In exchange, she received a salary and health coverage for her and her family, which would become exceptional luxuries as jobs remained scarce and doctors were increasingly targeted by militias as the war progressed. Despite the stressful environment of the war, Huda described her work as the most fulfilling she has ever done because she was rebuilding her city and improving the lives of the community for which she cared deeply.

[It] was a great job. You know, the way we rebuilt, rehabilitate facilities, it was really wonderful. Like, yes, they work in college, universities, even do publish books. They [employed] women, they send them to take the certificate in some kind of field. Yeah, it was a wonderful job.

Although Huda was dedicated to her work, she would be forced into increasingly dangerous situations as the conditions in Iraq worsened with the persistent lack of basic amenities, the continued armed conflicts between American troops and the militias in Iraq, and soon the civil war.

Zeinab, like many, lost her job when the war began. It was too dangerous for her to travel to the University because there were unpredictable battles and deadly explosions throughout the streets of Baghdad, so the laboratory had to let her go. She had been invested in her work and was upset by the interruption in her burgeoning career. Despite her professional loss, she tried to continue living her life as much as the surrounding danger allowed. She enjoyed the courtship of her college sweetheart, Khalid, exchanging letters often and the occasional visit whenever it was safe. He soon

proposed to her, and in 2006 they celebrated their union with a joyous wedding despite the country's subdued atmosphere. As was the custom, Khalid's family had prepared a room in their house for the couple, and Zeinab anticipated her new life there with her husband. They hoped their wedding would be a new beginning to help overcome the negatives of the war, but instead it was followed by a disastrous turning point.

That year saw a dramatic escalation in violence after militia attacks destroyed the Hassan al-Askari Mosque in Samara, a holy site to Shiite Muslims. The mosque's destruction initiated a sectarian rift in the country, dividing Sunni from Shia and sowing violence between them. Various militias were battling the American military and amongst themselves for control of the country, and, with the mosque's destruction, religious affiliation became implicated in that struggle. Iraqis throughout the country felt the growing tension. The threat became personal when members of an unknown militia murdered Zeinab's new father-in-law just one week after the wedding. He had been affiliated with the Ba'ath Party and was thus a threat to the new actors vying for political control. By extension, his family members were also targets of the violence. The newlyweds feared for their lives and fled for neighboring Syria a few days later, the smell of new furniture still permeating their unused room in the house of Zeinab's late father-in-law. The personal and professional losses of her job, community, and brand new place in society would haunt Zeinab as a defining feature of the aftermath as she moved away from Iraq and later to California.

Mustafa, too, tried to hold on to the life he had secured for himself in Iraq, which included his well-established engineering career, his children's future prospects, his physical possessions, and his position as a respected member of his community in Baghdad. "We [Iraqis] think at that time we can build Iraq again.... We decide to try to take contracts, to take control. This is our country. United States of America came to here, but they cannot know how to do [sic], 'cause it's different culture." After the war's beginning, he had secured a job with the American military as a contracted engineer. He resented the military presence in his country, but that work allowed him to help rebuild his city, generate income to support his family, and continue his career.

Despite his efforts to stay, by 2006 he and his family were confronted by unavoidable violence that forced them to leave. Mustafa described how unknown terrorists simultaneously attacked him at his workplace and his family at his house. The violence could have been spurred on by many factors, whether his apparent cooperation with Americans, his former status as a successful professional during the reign of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party, or any number of random motives decided by the terrorists. They all survived physically unscathed, but narrowly escaping an attempt on his life and then finding his wife and his mother huddled in fright under a table at home with his child wailing in their arms was enough to break his resolve to stay in Iraq. Regardless of the source, Mustafa could not endure any further death threats. Like Zeinab, with little choice besides leaving or dying, Mustafa packed up his family and the few belongings they could carry, said goodbye to his friends, his home, and the engineering company he had built from the ground up, and they escaped to Syria.

In addition to the violence between the militias and the American military, militias also began to target those who cooperated with Americans. Two of Huda's coworkers were kidnapped for working with an American company.

At the end of the program, it was hard. The manager of the program got kidnapped and his family paid \$100,000 [ransom]. And the other one got kidnapped and tortured. But thank god they're both alive. But we lose— (*begins to sob suddenly*). I'm sorry.

The destruction of the Hasan al-Askari Mosque and the increase in violence that encouraged Zeinab to leave also impacted Huda, when a third coworker was targeted by the sectarian conflict. She told me the story in short bursts, crying throughout.

It was a young man he was only 28. And his brother also was working with us, and—He was—I don't know, I don't like to talk about those stuff. But, all the *sunni's* and *shi'i's*—he was living in the *sunni's* area, and he was saying it's okay to live with them but the same day he's killed because his name's Ali! Until that, until then, until now I can't think of it — he was so—I couldn't go to his office and see his seat. I couldn't go upstairs, his office was upstairs. I couldn't go upstairs.

She took a deep breath and then briskly continued with the interview. “Yes. It was hard. I'm sorry. I get so emotional when I remember those stuff.” The danger increased daily. Although she had fought hard to restore her city to a functional and safe level, the constant death threats gave her no choice but to leave it all behind. Most of the Iraqis in this study had to escape to a neighboring country where they began a long wait for refugee status and resettlement, but Huda and a few others had a more secure means of leaving. Iraqis who worked for the American government for at least one consecutive year between 2003 and 2009 could apply for direct resettlement to the United States through an S.I.V. or Special Immigration Visa (U.S. State Department 2011). With that visa, she would travel to California to start anew. The loss of nearly everything familiar would be a defining and devastating feature of that aftermath for her.

One by one, as the fear and death threats became overwhelming, all Iraqis in this study took their savings and the few suitcases of clothing and photo albums that they could carry and left their country. By 2006, an estimated two and a half million Iraqi refugees had fled to neighboring Jordan or Syria, by car or airplane, and most were members of the middle and upper classes. Prospects there were bleak for those in this study. Refugees were not allowed to legally work, so most relied on their savings and whatever work would be undetected by the government until they could secure a visa to another country. Few were prepared for the news from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) that their only option for resettlement was the United States, the country that had started the war that initially caused their departure from Iraq.

Most knew very little about the U.S. and even less about Americans. Mustafa cited Hollywood films as his main source of knowledge about the country and its people before 2003. “We just saw what we saw on movies. Texas, movies, guns. Yeah. Arnold. Action movies, action movies!... We didn't know anything about their lives, the American lives, daily lives.” As of 2003, all had at least seen Americans in the form of the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Mustafa's opinion of Americans was fairly negative

because of the death of Noor's brother and their connection to his losses.

I have a bad impression, you know, because the first day they killed my brother-in-law. And after that, when we saw them on the street, they don't know anything about us... There is no communication. It is very hard. Even, we can talk, but we cannot trust each other. He cannot trust me and I cannot trust him.

Despite his negative impression of Americans, Mustafa, like all the rest, had no alternative.

They told me, it's not your choice. United States, or go back to Baghdad. So I told them at the first time, just give me time to think... When I am in Syria, I have the same language, I can barely survive. How can I survive in United States?... So I ask her, there is another choice?... At this time she told me, you just have United States. You have to go to United States.

Rather than risk forced return to Iraq where more death and destruction awaited, he and all of the Iraqis in this study ultimately accepted the visa to the U.S.

### **California: Beginning Anew**

The majority of Iraqis in this study moved to northern California between 2009 and 2010. It was upon their arrival that the personal, professional and status-based loss of the last decade fully manifested itself. All were initially hosted by refugee friends or distant relatives that helped sponsor their move, as required by the U.S. government. In cramped quarters they acknowledged the loss of their private space, wondered where to begin searching for a job, and accepted that they were foreigners without title or significant status in the busy city outside. California has the largest population of Iraqi refugees in the United States, with nearly eight thousand assigned to the state since 2003 (ORR 2011). Most are educated professionals (GAO 2010). Despite their professional capacity, the Iraqis in this study struggled to find employment in their fields or out. While the U.S. government offered services to help with their physical resettlement, such as transitional housing for the first few months and a small stipend, there were no programs to help them resume their professional careers. At the same time, the economy was also unstable and the market uncharacteristically flooded with unemployed Californians, leaving few of the entry-level jobs that could have normally been available for refugees.

Mustafa arrived in California eager to resume his career as an engineer, but the state resettlement agency instructed him to first apply for welfare. He was shocked. "I didn't want welfare. I wanted to work." With no resettlement programs to support his transition to an equal caliber of work and the high rate of unemployment among the general population, welfare was the most reasonable means of immediate financial security for Mustafa. He had no alternative but to volunteer in various office jobs shuffling papers in order to earn welfare. As soon as his volunteer schedule was stable,

Mustafa began searching for a way to return to his career. “I start to apply for civil engineering, and then I [learned] you have to get the license, you have to have passport. Then, like, foreman. And then I applied for clerk. And then I applied for technician. Nothing. For cashier, nothing whatsoever. Nothing. Oh my god!” Despite having a degree and more than a decade of experience running his own engineering company, he needed to be certified according to American engineering standards before a company would consider him. He began to study for the recertification exam, motivated by his overwhelming desire to return to the career he left behind in Iraq.

While he studied, Mustafa looked for other jobs to sustain him and his family when the welfare program ended. He submitted hundreds of job applications, seeking positions further down the pay scale and in any location that was hiring. Finally, nearly a year later, he was offered a building maintenance position. He would be a janitor. Mustafa had no choice but to accept the position. He was not ashamed of the job, but it cemented his professional loss and his loss of status. Not only could he not work in his field, but he was also relegated to one of the least-respected jobs by both American and Iraqi standards. “When you are in your community back there in Iraq, like that (*placing his hand high above his head*) and you are now like that (*placing his hand near the ground*), and you are almost 40 years old, it is very hard.” He worked full time, volunteered in the Iraqi community, and continued raising his children, all while still determinedly studying for recertification. Within a year, he passed the recertification exam and reapplied to work as an engineer, but the hurdles did not end there. Although the certificate verified that he was knowledgeable, the engineering companies then requested references to confirm his engineering work history. Having fled a country that was in turmoil, it was impossible for Mustafa to obtain those references, and recommendations from his janitorial job were insufficient. “They say it’s equal opportunity, but it’s not. How we get reference? (*Laughs.*) We are refugees!” He still has not been able to return to his career as an engineer, but he continues to search for a means.

Meanwhile, Mustafa has accrued new status by helping others in the Iraqi community, providing them counsel and leadership for everything from planning holiday celebrations to filing their taxes. Once again, he is a respected figure in his community, even if the larger society perhaps reduces him to his job title. He and Noor are reestablishing their home, recollecting meaningful belongings, and securing the futures of their children, who are effectively navigating the new school system. Like all of the Iraqis in this study, their priority had been to move their family to safety, and in that they succeeded. Still, Mustafa is disheartened by how much he lost. Regardless of the benefits afforded him or his family in California, as he said to me once, “This wasn’t my dream. I didn’t ask for this—any of this.” His gains, though significant in the context of the war, pale in comparison with all that he had before, with all that he lost.

While the aftermath for Mustafa is infused with his experience of professional loss, for Huda the most defining feature of the aftermath is the personal loss of what she fought so hard to keep. She reminisces about daily visits with her extended family, her beautiful home and garden, her beloved city, and the total sense of security and belonging that she felt there. Huda is grateful that her life in California is improved from the insecurities of living in the war-torn Iraq, but the loss of those salient components of her personal life haunts her every day. She no longer feels safe outside her home after

dark, hardly has space in the concrete patio of her rented apartment for a few potted plants, and constantly misses the supportive presence of her mother and siblings, who had to stay in Baghdad.

For Zeinab, the aftermath is defined by a combination of professional and personal loss. She left behind her family members and her neighborhood. She was also just beginning a life in a new home, with Khalid, and the loss of their room and belongings in that house was poignant for her. She wistfully recounted to me the matching set of a mirror and bed frame that she had wanted for years, and which she had received as a wedding present, only to abandon it along with most of her other belongings when she and Khalid fled the country. A cherished picture of that room with its matching set was in her wedding photo album, along with pictures of the friends and family that they left behind, some of whom were killed, some scattered as refugees in countries around the world, many still braving the danger in Iraq. Zeinab, like Huda, feels her personal loss each day that she spends in California, so far from her family and from the home that she and her husband had just barely begun in his parents' house.

Alongside her personal loss is the professional loss, which entailed losing her job, opportunities for professional development, and the value of her degree. After having to quit her work as a technician at the university, Zeinab lost a significant opportunity for professional advancement. She had been a candidate for a scholarship to travel abroad for her master's degree, but in the turmoil surrounding her father-in-law's death and her swift departure from Iraq, she missed a deadline to submit crucial paperwork that would have secured the scholarship. She is disappointed at the loss of that possibility, and also at the loss of the years in which she could have completed her studies. By now, she said, "my classmates, they all finish their master's degree, and their PhD also. And me, nothing." Now she has children, and raising them is time-consuming and takes precedence over completing a demanding course of study. With her parents and extended family thousands of miles away and her husband employed full-time, Zeinab has little help caring for the children.

She hoped to continue working as a lab technician, perhaps part-time, but she was unable to get a job in her field since American companies do not recognize her degree. She began attending a community college to take all of the classes required to become a lab technician in the U.S. This entailed retaking many of the same biology, microbiology, and other classes she had already completed in Iraq when first earning her degree. Zeinab is reminded of her professional loss with each subject that she must relearn. On a positive note, in pursuing classes at the community college, she realized that she could determine her own course of study. She has chosen to advance to a position in pharmacology, which was unavailable to her in Iraq. Given her initial college disappointment at having been consigned to a future as a lab technician, her current possibilities for professional advancement are significant. The gain in academic freedom helps mitigate but can never erase for her the dramatic losses provoked by the war.

Karwan, Nadia and Nabil were exceptions in this study. They were dissatisfied with their prospects in Iraq, while in California they attend community college and kindle ambitions for new careers, unencumbered by the limitations of the Ba'ath bureaucracy. They enjoy various other freedoms denied them in Iraq, like discussing

politics, traveling without restrictions, and becoming acquainted with the world outside their country. For them, their losses were not the deciding characteristic of the aftermath. Rather, their gains surpass the losses they suffered from the war, and they are pleased with their new direction in life. For the rest of the group, and for the majority of Iraqi refugees I met who were displaced by the war, the aftermath was overwhelmingly one of loss.

### **Conclusions: Of Loss and Gain**

On December 14, 2011, President Obama concluded military operations in Iraq and commanded the last of the American troops to withdraw, ending the war nearly nine years after President Bush declared its beginning in March of 2003. The alleged ‘weapons of mass destruction’ used to justify the war were never found. Within the space of less than ten years, the daily realities for the Iraqi refugees in this study transformed from a predictable stability under an Iraqi dictator to deadly chaos in his absence, and then to a quiet but as yet unsettled life as impending citizens of a democracy half-way across the world. They left behind their homes, their professions, and many of their family members. Most of the refugees in this study lost their standing as respected professionals. Many also lost the physical foundations and personal connections that defined their lives before the war. Some experienced drastic loss that was somewhat tempered, though not erased, by opportunities for professional and personal redevelopment. For a select few, their prospects in California far outweighed the damages of the war. For the group as a whole, the change caused by the aftermath involved some gains, but it was largely a story of loss.

The refugees’ loss is one component within a larger framework of the aftermath that I analyze in my thesis, which includes a parallel examination of similarly dramatic changes in the lives of American veterans of the war, as well as an analysis of the shared experiences of the refugees and veterans in that aftermath. In addition to creating a refugee crisis among Iraqis, the war generated 1.5 million American veterans. As my larger thesis illustrates, the refugees and veterans alike found themselves surrounded by a general public that was distanced from the war and rather numb to its effects. One result among veterans is an alarming rate of suicides, with an estimated 18 veterans taking their lives every day (Parrish 2011). The normalization of the war has left the veterans and refugees on their own to grapple with the burdens of a destructive conflict that was, in the experiences of most in my study, unwarranted and of international consequence.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All names pseudonyms.

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