Quick Cultural Guide: Iraq

This guide is intended to help Boise State University (BSU) students and community volunteers prepare for their service experience with refugee resettlement agencies. Learning about a refugee’s nation of origin, languages, and cultures is fundamental to understanding who they are and thus more effectively helping them integrate into American culture. Additionally, tips for teaching English and interacting socially will improve communication and the chances of a successful experience for both the volunteer and the refugee. It takes many human-service professionals as well as volunteers from the community to participate in refugee resettlement program. Thank you for helping to welcome refugees to our community.

The Staff of the BSU Service Learning Center

Where is Iraq?

Iraq is a country in the heart of the Middle East. It is approximately twice the size of Idaho [1]. Its neighbors include Iran to the east, Turkey to the north, Syria and Jordan to the east, and Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to the south (see Figure 1). Its ancient name, Mesopotamia, literally translated means, land between the rivers—the Tigris and the Euphrates [2].

The stretch of land to the west of the Euphrates is desert. The land to the east, between the Euphrates and the Tigris is described as a fertile alluvial plain, or a large flat area composed of layered river sediment [4]. To the northeast, the landscape gradually climbs from foothills to mountains reaching elevations of 10,000 feet in some places [1]. In the southern region, near the Persian Gulf, the landscape is primarily marshland.

Climate

The climate in Iraq has been compared to that of the extreme southwestern U.S. [5]. In the summer, it is very hot and dry with temperatures climbing as high as 140 degrees Fahrenheit. Winters are very cold, with temperatures dropping below zero. Snowfall is common in the mountainous areas, but rare across the plains. Spring and Fall tend to be mild and pleasant in Iraq [5].
Iraq Quick Cultural Guide

What is the Conflict?

In his article entitled, “Three years later, the good, the bad and the ugly,” journalist Richard Engel compares his experience in Baghdad in March of 2003, weeks before the U.S. invasion, to his observation of the city three years later:

When I first arrived in Baghdad before the war, Iraq seemed lifeless. Baghdad felt like a city without oxygen, where those with big dreams couldn’t breathe or imagine a better life. Now, the country is very changed—in some ways better—but it has become equally menacing, terrifying and sinister [6].

Iraqis have hardly known peace in their country and have yet to experience true political freedom; they are a nation in the middle of a violent upheaval. Tensions between three religious/ethnic groups have dominated the Middle East since the first century A.D. and Iraq is no exception [7]. The following information is vital in understanding the three religious/ethnic groups and their influence on the history and present state of conflict in Iraq:

- The Islamic religion is divided into two main groups: The Sunni (85-90% of the Islamic world population) and the Shiites, or “Shi’a” (10-15 % of the Islamic world population) [8].
- Upon the death of Islam’s prophet, Muhammad, in 632 A.D., Islam split into Sunni and Shiites as the result of a disagreement about how to handle the leadership of the Muslim faith [7].
- In Iraq, the Sunni are the minority, yet they hold the majority of power. Saddam Hussein was a Sunni [7].
- The Shiites are the ethnic/religious majority in Iraq, but they have historically held no power and were discriminated against by Hussein [7].
- The Kurds are an ethnic group in northern Iraq (20% of Iraq’s population). In spite of the majority of Kurds being Sunni, they were also persecuted under Hussein [7].
- The Shiites and Kurds have rebelled periodically against discrimination and persecution under Hussein [7].
- The ethno-religious tensions within Iraq span the Middle East and characterize much of the internal conflict within the Muslim world.

As a result of warring ethnic and religious factions, Iraq has had a long history of political instability and violent regime change. After Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979, three wars ravaged Iraq and its people:

1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War (also known as the First Persian Gulf War). This multi-faceted war resulted from longstanding border disputes between Iran and Iraq; access to the Persian Gulf; and ethno-religious tensions between Sunni and Shiite groups [9]. The war estimated 500,000 deaths [10].

1983-1987 Kurdish Massacre

Concurrent with the Iran-Iraq War, an
uprising for independence in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq prompted the ethnic cleansing of an estimated 180,000 Kurds by Hussein [11].

1990-1991 Operation Desert Storm
Also known as the Second Gulf War: Iraq invaded Kuwait, claiming it as their 19th province. Hussein refuses to follow U.N. orders to withdraw, resulting in U.S. air strikes on Baghdad [11].

2003-present Operation Iraqi Freedom- Waged initially as part of the “War on Terror”, by the United States following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001; and based on allegations that Iraq was housing weapons of mass destruction, U.S. forces invaded Baghdad and crushed Hussein’s regime [2]. Over time, both claims have been proven inaccurate and the Bush Administration cites “Saddam Hussein’s despotism and human rights abuses” [2] as the main impetus for war.

Since the American occupation of Iraq and the overthrow of Hussein’s regime;

What was their journey?
In spite of some positive movement in the current conflict, one in five Iraqis is currently without a permanent home.

Life in Iraq
Life in Iraq cannot be discussed without mentioning the effect three decades of war has had on its people, and consequently its cultural development. In spite of turbulent circumstances, many foundational aspects of Iraqi culture have persisted, such as religious tradition, language, and many familial conventions. However, the present culture also reflects the constant chaos and extreme economic hardship brought about by Saddam Hussein’s dictatorial leadership and war. The following facts remain central to understanding Iraqi culture:

- 97% of Iraqis are Muslim (Shiite 60-65%, Sunni 32-37%), 3% Christian or other [2].
- Islam is the official state religion [2].
- Arabic is the official language of Iraq [2].
- Ethnicity: 75-80% Arab; 15-20% Kurdish [2]

Since January of 2009, some progress has been noted in Iraq, including:

- Iraqi government taking control of security responsibilities previously overseen by U.S. forces (i.e., the Green Zone) [2].
- Local elections in Iraq occurring with minimal violence. Voter turnout ranging from under 50% to 75% [2].
- President Obama making an announcement that he expects most American troops to be withdrawn from Iraq by August of 2010 [2].

(Iraq’s total population is estimated at around 28,221,181 [2].) [13].

sectorian violence between Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds has been constant. In determining the number of deaths resulting from the war, “there is no shortage of estimates, but they vary enormously…results range from just under 100,000 dead to well over a million” [12].
• 74% of the population is literate [2].

• Extended family groups are the fundamental social units in Iraq and extended families often live together under one roof [14].

• Loyalty to family is an essential Iraqi quality; prior to the current war, the government mandated families to have at least 5 children [14].

• Marriage and children are expected of everyone [15].

• A high percentage of Iraqis are educated, as “six years of compulsory education have been in effect since 1978” and an estimated 30% of these students go on to secondary schools and higher education [16].

• Iraqis are required to begin studying English in the fifth grade and continue until the age of eighteen. After this, they study English as it pertains to different jobs they are learning (e.g., medicine, engineering, etc.) [17]

While these aspects of Iraqi culture have stayed consistent, certain roles within family and society have changed to accommodate the extreme conditions of war. For instance, it is traditional for men to serve as the heads of the household. This role has shifted to women as more men become absent in service to the military or in some cases, because of war-related death. In addition to assuming additional roles of leadership within the home, many women have become the sole financial providers for their family by obtaining jobs outside of the home [14].

Even as women in Iraq have moved into positions of power within the family and on economic and political fronts during wartime, they are generally disallowed from holding any positions of leadership within the Islamic social order. It is largely due to this religious influence that social rights and privileges for Iraqi women remain unequal to those of men [14]. According to everyculture.com, “If gender reform is to take place, it will have to be within the context of Islamic law” [14].

**Portrait of a Refugee:**

An Iraqi man named Omar, opted to continue living and working in Baghdad after the U.S. occupation of the city in 2003. Fearing for the safety of her family, Omar’s wife, Safa would travel to Jordan with her three children to stay with her brother’s family for five or six months at a time.

During a visit back to Baghdad in 2006, Safa’s husband was kidnapped. In a letter from the kidnappers, Safa was told her husband had been taken because of his Sunni heritage. Safa and her children were threatened and eventually, her husband was murdered. Unsafe in her Baghdad home, and not wanting to endanger her extended family in Jordan, Safa fled with her three children to Syria.
For two years, Safa used her savings to rent a small apartment and feed her family. When the savings ran out, Safa sold some of her jewelry for money. Eventually, she and her children immigrated to the United States as refugees. Even with a Bachelor’s degree and well-developed English skills, Safa has not been able to find a job. She has only a few remaining pieces of jewelry to help supplement her family’s income.

The culture of Iraq reflects the experience of its people. Prior to the demise of the current regime in 2003, Saddam Hussein’s power reached all aspects of economic, political, and family life. Iraqis lived under the direct oversight of the government and according to Hussein’s edicts:

As a leader he was known to be ruthless and thuggish. According to published accounts, Saddam eliminated anyone who opposed him and carried out mass executions of people who could pose a threat to his regime [11].

Under Hussein’s tyrannical rule, Iraqi culture developed in response to people living in continuous fear. Over the past three decades, Iraqi culture has not flourished; it has merely survived. The following section details Iraq’s history of internal and external conflict and the way the current war continues to affect Iraqi refugees.

Asylum Abroad/Life in Refugee Camps

Unlike many of the refugee groups moving to Boise, the great majority of Iraqis never spend time living in refugee camps prior to coming to the United States. It is far more likely that they lived in displacement within Iraq or in temporary asylum in neighboring countries.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) makes the following estimates about the number of Iraqi refugees:

More than 4.7 million Iraqis have left their homes, many in dire need of humanitarian care. Of these, more than 2.7 million Iraqis are displaced internally, while more than 2 million have fled to neighboring states, particularly Syria and Jordan [19].

Of the 4.7 million Iraqis without permanent homes, only a fraction (an estimated 100,000) have moved to refugee camps located outside of Damascus in Syria [20]. Of the refugees occupying the camps, most, if not all, are Palestinians fleeing Iraq. These people originally settled in Iraq as refugees during the founding of Israel [21].

Most Iraqi refugees have moved to countries bordering Iraq in search of safer living conditions. While they do experience less violence, refugees trade one set of difficulties in Iraq for another set of challenges in their country of refuge. According to a report by Refugees International, “most [Iraqi refugees] are unable to access their food rations and are often unemployed; they live in squalid conditions, have run out of resources and find it extremely difficult to access essential services” [21].

As often occurs in desperate financial situations where women are the sole providers for their families, tens of thousands of Iraqi girls and women
living abroad have resorted to prostitution in order to survive [20].

**Portrait of a Refugee:**

Journalist Romola Garai spent some time in Syria in the early months of 2009 documenting the refugee crisis as of 2009. The following excerpt from her article, No Man’s Land illustrates a common scenario befalling many Iraqi refugees:

12-year-old Ali lives in a windowless flat in the basement of an apartment block in Seyeda Zeinab, a slum on the outskirts of Damascus. His mother, Amira, fled Baghdad in 2007 after her husband, two brothers and father were murdered. Amira worked as a hairdresser in Iraq; she is now working as a prostitute in Damascus. Her two sons go to the club with her at night because she doesn't want to leave them on their own; they aren't in school. Amira is one of the many refugees who, as the Syrian government doesn't permit them to work, simply couldn't make the rent on her apartment anymore. She told me that her husband's family have discovered how she is earning money in Damascus and have threatened to kidnap her children and murder her if she comes even close to the border. Returning to Iraq is not an option for her at the moment – and she is not alone. Not a single one of the Iraqi refugees I met in Syria ever wanted to go back to Iraq [22].

Throughout the current conflict in Iraq, some refugees have become desperate enough in their resettlement situations to risk returning to their homes. Upon returning to Iraq, most refugees find a completely changed world where their homes have been destroyed, or if left standing, are often occupied by squatters [21]. In spite of the negative aspects of a homecoming, the opinion of one returning refugee illustrates some Iraqis’ resolve to return home: “if [I am] to die, at least [I] will be with family, in [my] homeland” [13].

**Life in Boise**

Any person seeking refugee resettlement in the U.S. works with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and applies for resettlement through the U.S. Refugee Admission Program (USRAP) [23]. As of February 4, 2009, statistics were as follows [23]:

- 27,119 Iraqi refugee applicants had been approved for resettlement.
- 19,910 refugees have arrived in the U.S. since the inception of the program in 2007.
- 400 refugees have resettled in Boise between the years 2000 and 2009 [24].

Of the refugees granted resettlement in the U.S., one or more of the following characteristics apply [23]:

- They are relatives of current U.S. citizens.
- They willingly assisted U.S. forces in Iraq (as translators, interpreters or contractors) and fear retaliation.
• They are related to Iraqis who worked for U.S. forces in Iraq (often includes women-headed households where fathers have been kidnapped or killed).

Of the refugees resettling in Boise, most, if not all, have suffered tragic losses. Homes have been destroyed or occupied by militias, family members and friends have been injured, kidnapped or killed, and the Iraqi way of life has been radically altered. Although resettling in an America city is a safe alternative to life in Iraq, refugees live in constant memory of their homeland and the people they love who are fighting for survival.

It is also important to understand that many Iraqi refugees are highly educated with professional skills. Unfortunately, the non-transfer of educational and professional accreditation to the United States impedes many Iraqis from qualifying for jobs in their given profession. As a result, many Iraqis cannot obtain jobs. If they are able to find a job, the wage is often meager, making providing for their families nearly impossible. Although many Iraqis continue applying for resettlement in America, some are beginning to rethink the “American Dream.”

In a March, 2009 Chicago Tribune article entitled, “Iraqis moving to the U.S.: Once prized chance for life in America losing luster”, journalist Tina Susman interacts with Iraqi, Raheem, just after he learns of his acceptance for resettlement in America:

"What do you think?” he asked, as calmly as if inviting my opinion on a new shirt. But Raheem, who speaks English with poetic fluency and carries himself with the dignity of an Ivy League lecturer, already knew he would not go.

In Iraq, he owns property and has a job, and his son has a promising career in computer technology. Bombs, of course, still go off; and gunfire still crackles in the streets. But the epidemic of bloodshed seems a thing of the past. The local news, meanwhile, reports on America's economic woes, of foreclosed homes being auctioned off for a pittance. Word filters back from Iraqis in the United States who are unable to find work, struggling to afford medical care and devouring savings that once seemed everlasting [25].

The Iraqi refugee experience is complex and often chaotic. By taking time to understand their journey and by welcoming and assisting Iraqis as they integrate into American culture, specifically Boise, successful resettlement becomes a possibility.

What Activities Might I do with Refugees?

According to past volunteers, every activity is a learning opportunity for refugees. A good first step may be sharing a meal in the refugee’s home to get acquainted with the family and help them practice speaking English. When refugees feel comfortable, outings in town provide first-hand experiences with American culture.

The activities below are suggested for the time you spend interacting with Iraqi
refugees. In addition to these activities, they might have specific errands in mind. Volunteers are encouraged to plan activities within walking distance of the refugees’ home or take public transportation instead of using their own vehicles.

**Local Mosques and Activity Centers**

**Imam Al-Mahdi Islamic Center** *(www.idahoshiacenter.com)*
4243 N. Cloverdale Rd.
Boise, ID 83713
(208) 353-8880

**Islamic Center of Boise** *(www.boisemuslims.org)*
2719 Stewart St.
Boise, ID 83702
(208) 429-1866

**Ethnic Markets**

**Kabul Market**
5751 Overland Road
Boise, Idaho 83705
208-322-6660

**Euroasia Market**
590 North Maple Grove Road
Boise, ID 83704

**India Food Market**
501 North Orchard Street
Boise, Idaho 83705
208-322-6660

**Restaurants**

**Cazba**
211 North Eighth Street
Boise, ID 83702
208-381-0222

**Mazzah**
404 E Park Center Blvd
Boise, ID 83706
208.333.2223

Is It Something I Said?

As Iraq’s official state religion, Islam dictates most aspects of Iraqi culture. Take time before you plan activities to ask about an individual’s or family’s preferences regarding the following. The following ideas are merely suggestions based on established Iraqi etiquette [26]:

- Clothing should be modest for both sexes.
- Establishments serving alcohol should be avoided unless you have checked with the refugee family.
- Jokes about God or informal references to God should be avoided.
- Foods containing pork or ham are forbidden.
- Movies should be “family friendly” and not involve potentially offensive material.
Gifts (e.g., box of chocolates, cookies or flowers) brought to the refugee family’s home are considered completely acceptable and are a positive gesture.

**Helpful Arabic phrases** [27]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greetings</th>
<th>Basics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hello:</strong></td>
<td>as-salaam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>alaykum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hello (response):</strong></td>
<td>wa alaykum e-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>salaam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes:</strong></td>
<td>aiwa/na’am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No:</strong></td>
<td>la</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hello (person leaving):</strong></td>
<td>ma'a salama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maybe:</strong></td>
<td>mumkin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goodbye (person staying):</strong></td>
<td>alla ysalmak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Please:</strong></td>
<td>min fadhlik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good morning:</strong></td>
<td>sabaH ala-kheir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thank you:</strong></td>
<td>shukran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good afternoon:</strong></td>
<td>masa' al-kheir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>You’re welcome:</strong></td>
<td>afwan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good night:</strong></td>
<td>tisbaH ala-kheir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Excuse me:</strong></td>
<td>lo tismah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Welcome:</strong></td>
<td>ahl an wa sahlan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OR marHaba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OK:</strong></td>
<td>tayib</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Where can I learn more?**

For specific information on Iraqi refugees, visit the following sites:

- [http://www.culturalorientation.net](http://www.culturalorientation.net)
- [Http://www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)
- [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) - “Iraq, Land Between Two Rivers” - A photographic journey of the landscapes, monuments and cities of Iraq (pre-war).
- [http://www.unhcr.org/iraq.html](http://www.unhcr.org/iraq.html) - The UN Refugee Agency’s website on the situation in Iraq; photos, stories, updates and statistics.
- [http://www.slate.com/id/2145533/](http://www.slate.com/id/2145533/) - Modern Iraqi Manners; provides link to download “Iraq Culture Smart Card” created by Marine Corps Intelligence Activity (MCIA).

**References**


[18] Interview with visiting Iraqi refugee. 2009 March 31.


