

Community and Identity among Iraqi Refugees in San Diego

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Abstract

This study looks at the maintenance of culture and identity among Iraqi refugees in San Diego. The forced migrants settle in a new environment and as a result face language and cultural barriers between them and the American locals. They deal with this situation by forming a tight-knit Christian Iraqi community. To understand the daily lives and perspectives of the individuals of this community in El Cajon, interviews were conducted with eight Christian Iraqis and participant-observation was carried out during eight days. Culture and identity are maintained through traditions, religion and values and simultaneously serve to strengthen neighborly relationships. These traditions are tied to food and drinks, media, music, dance and celebrations and are determined by their unique values connected to family, social life and generosity. Their religious life is intertwined in some way with all the previously stated cultural practices, all of which aid in facing the struggles of integration. Issues mainly include misunderstandings between people and the continuous sense of instability (financial and citizenship status). There are various types of refugees, each group in a unique situation, and it is significant to understand the specific circumstances and struggles of this Christian Iraqi community, to best assist in bettering their lives.

Honor Pledge

*On my honor, I have neither given, nor received, any unauthorized aid on this honors thesis.
Honor Code upheld.*

Kim van Lookeren Campagne

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Introduction

Iraq has been in and out of conflict for decades which has resulted in one of the greatest refugee crises of the century. Neighboring countries Jordan and Syria took in most of the forced migrants directly from Iraq, but many other countries have accepted refugees since the need increased. Previous research shows that Iraqi refugees have to a large extent stayed invisible to the eyes of others, and past studies focused mainly on migration to neighboring countries Jordan and Syria. Emphasis has been placed on the political and civil rights of Iraqi refugees, but very little attention has been given to their economic, social and cultural rights. Accordingly, my research seeks to address the following questions: (1) how do Christian Iraqi immigrants and refugees maintain their identity and form a sense of community while integrating into American society; and (2) what struggles arise with this paradox?

My research on the meaning of community in a globalized context will focus on Iraqi immigrants in San Diego, and the maintenance of their Iraqi identity while integrating into American society. Forced migration as a result of conflict has effects on identity and culture, and the significant role community plays in settling in an unfamiliar place. I want to note that my use of the term integration is not without hesitation. As I will discuss, many Iraqi migrants do not want or do not feel like they can integrate into American society. On the contrary, I believe integration is indeed already happening. Whether it is done willingly or not, integration is unavoidable as intercultural relationships grow.

The main concepts that will be discussed and tied to the context of this research are refugees, migration, community, integration and identity. By attempting to grasp the ways in which Iraqis settle into the United States, both in how they maintain their culture and integrate into American society, one can better understand the struggles of Iraqi refugees

who have supposedly reached the best possible situation of attaining a visa to a modernized country, and the limits of the ways in which refugees are supported: especially socially, culturally and economically. I seek to analyze the concepts related to this topic by comparing the scholars' point of view to the Iraqi refugees' understanding of the ideas; perceptions that not always match. I wish to challenge preconceived notions and erase misunderstandings about the Iraqis living in the United States.

For the refugees, integration is both desired and kept at a comfortable distance. The Iraqis are significantly attached to their values, traditions and pride to be Iraqi and I therefore identify the main ways in which culture is maintained through food and drink, music and dance, ceremonies, surrounding, relationships, family values, and religion. All these are incorporated in the daily lives of the Iraqis in San Diego. Every person I interviewed is a Christian Iraqi and I therefore discuss the role of their religion in community building as well as their individual identities.

I was in San Diego from the 22nd to the 30th of August conducting interviews and learning about the lives of my friend's family and acquaintances through participant observation. My data includes interviews with people of various ages and genders to demonstrate generational differences and how gender plays a role in the dynamics of family and the community. My study will demonstrate the role stability plays in the lives of these people; in which ways they feel more secure and how they feel less safe. The Iraqi refugees struggle with finding employment, have financial difficulties and have contrasting feelings towards the idea of integrating into American society. Integration therefore gets a new meaning in this context as well as what stability means to the Iraqi versus Americans.

My research project illuminates how Iraqi immigrants preserve their identity and culture, and form a community in difficult circumstances and following traumatic events. I analyze how radical changes tied to forced migration affect a culture and the formation of a community. The topic of Iraqi immigrants and refugees in the United States has gone largely unnoticed, in part because of the complexity and ambiguities of the war in Iraq. I therefore wish to shed light on the lives of Iraqi immigrants and some of the still prevalent issues of the Iraqi refugee crisis.

A Scattered Population

In 2009, at the United World College of the Atlantic, one of my housemates was the only Iraqi at the international school there to represent her country. As our friendship grew I learned the shocking reality that she was two years behind because she had experienced two years of war in Iraq during which she was not able to study. Her family was no longer living in Iraq because they had fled to neighboring Syria. While we studied together, her family was able to get visas to come to the United States and they ended up settling in San Diego, thus becoming a part of what is currently the largest group of Iraqi refugees in the United States.

Ben Sanders and Merrill Smith (2007:18) state that “the Iraq war has created a flow of forced migrants, both within and across national borders, numbering around four million people, or approximately 15 percent of Iraq’s population.” Previous research (Libal and Harding 2007) demonstrates that the refugee crisis has not attained the appropriate attention from both the US and international media, and the US government. This is the

result of several factors, one of which is outlined by Kathryn Libal and Scott Harding who argue that the focus is placed on the war itself rather than the consequences: “Analysts appear more interested in tracing the vicissitudes of US policy and the rise of ethnic and sectarian conflict than the lived social consequences of the war” (2007:18).

According to Sanders and Smith, another reason governments have struggled with confronting the refugee crisis is that the Iraqi migrants have to a large extent remained invisible. In contrast to other refugee populations, e.g. the Indochinese, who had to flee in noticeable ways such as over-crowded ships, Iraqis crossed into Syria and Jordan by ordinary means of transportation. The Iraqi families reside in major cities, blending in and getting lost to the outside world among the people in Damascus and Amman (2007:23). The common perception is that refugees live in tents, clustered in ghettos, often in need of food and water. While basic needs are pressing, the majority of Iraqi refugees do not fit this narrative. Instead, Iraqi forced migrants want to rebuild their lives, which requires long-term solutions. Rakhi Sinha and her colleagues (2012:435) argue that

human rights dialogue and practice have been skewed toward civil and political rights in comparison to economic, social, and cultural rights. However, both in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the subsequent international human rights treaties, the two components of rights are given equal importance, with an emphasis placed on their coexistence and inseparability.

My project looks at a different side of refugee life, focusing on who these individuals are and how their lives changed when they fled their country. Settling refugees in Western countries like Canada and the United States are seen as a long-term solution, but not much research has been done on what happens after they arrive in these places. Talal Al-Qdah and Marie Lacroix (2011:522), for example, only describe the resettlement in Canada, the US and Australia, but there is no mention of a support network in these

Western countries or if any issues arise once the refugees are resettled: “social workers find themselves in situations that require, according to experts, long-term solutions, including the resettlement of refugees in countries such as Canada, the USA and Australia.” Peter Mares argues that when forced migrants arrive in the developed world they no longer receive the same compassion and assistance. They go from being portrayed as “helpless victims of circumstance” to threats in the receiving countries. Refugees “who display this level of agency suddenly shed the veneer of innocence” and the local population can no longer keep a safe distance from the crisis (Newman and van Selm 2003:330).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) came up with a definition of what a refugee is in order to best assist people who are in danger in their own country. In the 1951 Convention “a refugee...is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR: 3). Most of the people I interviewed got visas to come to the United States because they had refugee status. Even if they were not officially labeled refugees when they migrated away from Iraq, every Iraqi in San Diego responded that they left Iraq because of fear of persecution. The term refugee is central to this study as every person included told me they left in search of refuge away from the war.

The Convention also “places obligations upon states which are party to it, the most fundamental of which is the principle of ‘*non-refoulement*’. This concerns the obligation of countries of asylum not to return people forcibly to a dangerous situation where they have a well-founded fear of persecution” (UNHCR 2000:2). I therefore explore the UNHCR’s idea of who refugees are in the context of the Iraqis in San Diego. Previous

literature refers to the significant number of Iraqi refugees in San Diego which demonstrates the value of looking at San Diego: "...during FYs [fiscal year] 2008 and 2009, California received 24% (6,626) of all U.S.-bound Iraqi refugees, the largest proportion of any state [and] San Diego County received 5,397 (81%) of the 6,626 Iraqi refugees who resettled in California during FYs 2008 and 2009" (anonymous 2010:1614).

The Iraqi refugees left their familiar homes to move to a new place which is why migration is another main concept tied to my research. Adrian Favell (1998:3) wants readers to note the "inherently international dimension of migration and the social change it provokes." In the context of the Iraqi refugees one can classify the type of migration that occurred more specifically as "forced migration" (Chatty and Finlayson 2010). Terms such as diaspora and displacement are vague and used as broader umbrella-terms. Iraqi migrants have indeed been involuntarily scattered across the globe and by using the term forced migration I want to emphasize the origin and nature of the displacement as a result "of conflict within and between societies" (Newman and van Selm 2003:3) which happens involuntarily and rushed. Scholars in "refugee studies," have criticized "the transnational paradigm for ignoring the role of refugees and/or forced migration" (Horevitz 2009:754). Although "Refugee theory" might not actually exist in its own right, forced migration has been somewhat undervalued in the discourse on transnationalism (Horevitz 2009:754).

Once refugees are able to settle in a different country they become just a part of the constant waves of immigrants. The issue of distinguishing between refugees and immigrants is therefore still debated. According to the UNHCR (2000: 280):

people who flee their home countries out of a fear of persecution join a larger stream of migrants who leave in search of opportunities for work, education, reunification with family members, or for other reasons [...] about 15 million, or 10 per cent, are refugees.

While the categories are neatly distinguished on paper, in reality the boundaries between them are far from clear and the connections between them are many. I explore how, even though the Iraqi population can also be considered immigrants, people should understand their specific situation and keep in mind the struggles faced by Iraqi refugees alone. People living in the host country, often see them as just another group of immigrants and don't consider the complexities of migration. Studying the example of an Iraqi refugee immigrant community is thus significant to understanding the various layers in migrating populations.

Once people migrate from one place to another they eventually integrate into the foreign society. There are various perspectives on the concept of integration. Favell interprets integration as “imposing unity through a process which passes from initial contact between minority and majority groups, through conflict and transformation, to the final goal of assimilation” (1998:3). I will demonstrate how the Iraqi refugees view integration and present examples of the conflict and transformation that arise in the context of the Iraqis settling in the United States. My research supports David W. Haines' (1989) research on the role of language during integration:

in a bicultural setting, fluency in the dominant language is a central resource in the social and economic adaptation of these newcomers—affecting such areas as access to health care and social services, the possibility of communicating and developing relationships with dominant group members, the ability to get a job or a driver's license and to learn basic information about U.S. society (147).

Characteristic to a group migrating from the same country is that they form communities together in order to facilitate settling in a new environment. I analyze how the Iraqis build and are still building their community through cultural bonds, which will also demonstrate the value Iraqis place on relationships, and the various aspects of the idea

of safety and stability. Coming to an unfamiliar place they want to create a safe environment for themselves.

When settled somewhere different than their original home, they often do not lose the connection to their country as it has already become a set part of their identity. Identity is made up of the individual, but also by what groups someone belongs to (Chatty and Finlayson 2010). Community and identity are tightly connected, which is why I pay particular attention to how much community is part of the Iraqi's identity and how much they still feel connected to Iraq. Chatty and Finlayson (2010:216) argue that "from a Western, postmodernist perspective, identity is understood as a factor of one's cultural, social, familial, and individual sense of self." However, they also emphasize that Iraqi identity is multi-layered and fluid: "From an Iraqi perspective, a new Iraqi identity is currently struggling to emerge in light of the changes following the American invasion of 2003" (215). One should also keep in mind that Iraqis have both a sense of belonging to the Arab world as well as their own ethnic/historical group such as "Shi'ite, Sunni, Arab, Kurd, Assyrian, Sabeen, Christian, etc." (215). I look at one of these groups, Christian Iraqis specifically, to understand the role religion plays in the forming of the Iraqi community. My research demonstrates the complexity of identity as I investigate what happens to their identity once they settle in San Diego and if these ethnic/historical groups play a role in community building. Community is a large part of individual identities, which means the two are connected. Both are also flexible and complex, as their role and meaning vary from person to person.

Research Design

I used the existing literature reviewed in the above section to find connections in my observations and tie them to previous conclusions, as well as to identify flaws or limitations of current ideas. I therefore use my results to better understand and/or challenge the concepts of refugees, migration, community, integration and identity. It is integral to accept the way the Iraqi refugees understand these concepts as valid perspectives. Preconceived notions I had stemmed from media portrayals of refugees and Middle Eastern culture as well as various conversations I had with my friend Sawsan before doing the research. My personal connection to Sawsan and her family influenced the research, yet it also provided an environment of trust and respectful interactions with the Iraqi community.

My interest in forced migration emerged from my friendship with Sawsan and my own experiences with being an outsider in various places. Integration happens as a result of migration, but integration is not a smooth and simple process, especially in the case of forced migration. I therefore wanted to study not just integration, but resistance to integration and the challenges that arise with settling into a new place. Community building can greatly assist in facilitating the process of settling and integrating and I am thus looking at the role of community and identity among the Iraqi refugees. By using sociocultural Anthropological methodology to look at forced migration I illuminate the changes Iraqi refugees experience and how they deal with these changes. Challenges that arise when looking at forced migration are that it is difficult to go deeply into what they experienced as many memories are tied to war and suffering. Moreover, there is still some caution against people outside their own community and a significant language barrier as they are used to mainly being around each other.

I conducted semi-structured and structured interviews and engaged in participant-observations for data collection. The collected data enabled analysis of the differences and similarities between the various people I interviewed and between previous literature and my own data. I look at the concepts outlined in the section ‘A scattered Population’ through the eyes of the people I met and interviewed. I identify the changes they are experiencing and struggling with, and study how these shape their current lives and identity in San Diego. I was able to form a more holistic picture of the lives of the Iraqi immigrants.

I stayed in San Diego for a period of eight days during which I stayed at the house of my friend and her family. This allowed me to observe details of their lives and ways of thinking that they were not overtly aware of and did not communicate during interviews. Sawsan introduced me to other Christian Iraqi families in the neighborhood in order to observe interactions between families and gain various perspectives. I interviewed members of three families, a total of eight people, in order to include people of different ages and genders. Interviewing young adults and parents presented variability in experiences and opinions. I interviewed six women and two men: Sawsan (twenty-three years old), her two sisters Noor and Marina (twenty and twenty-four years old), her two parents Bassam and Dalia, a family friend Kathy, and the parents of Marina’s fiancée Minerva and Yousif (all in their fifty or sixty’s). The names used here are all pseudonyms for the sake of preserving people’s anonymity. Ideally, the research would have benefitted from more male perspectives but due to circumstances that was not possible.

I encountered a number of challenges. One man’s mother fell ill and so he had to care for her, Marina’s fiancée Sabah was busy with work, and I also found that because my friend is female most of her connections were women. Although the people I interviewed

all experienced loss of possessions, the interviewees presented variability in economic backgrounds which influences how they deal with their financial situations as refugees. For example, Sawsan's father Bassam worked for the United Nations and Kathy had a high position in the field of chemistry. Bassam now works with The Chaldean & Middle Eastern Social Services (CMSS), a non-profit corporation to help Iraqi and Middle Eastern refugees and immigrants. In my interview with Bassam I added some questions on the CMSS to learn more about the organization and to learn of which problems Iraqi refugees seek help. Through the CMSS website I researched their role in the community and their relationship to the Iraqis.

The interviews were designed to better understand why these families settled in San Diego (voluntarily or involuntarily) instead of other countries or other places in the United States. I aimed to identify what the most significant differences are between their lives in Iraq and their current lives in the United States with regard to jobs, education, relationships, and others. In addition, I asked about their worries and their main struggles with integrating into American society. Significant to note is that the data collected outside of formal interviews was equally valuable to my research as the interviews. Informal conversations would often go into more depth as the people would feel more comfortable.

Although the native language of the participants is Arabic, the individuals I interviewed had at least basic proficiency in English. I do not speak Arabic and I wanted to avoid translation as much as possible since I did not have access to a professional translator and could easily misinterpret what they wanted to say. This prevented me from interviewing grandparents, as the ones I met spoke no English. Sawsan translated most of my interview with Minerva because speaking in Arabic allowed her to respond in more

depth. Sawsan is fluent in both Arabic and English and therefore helped me if an individual was unable to express a word/sentence in English. I conducted my first interview with Sawsan so that she could help me change the wording of the questions so that the people would know what I meant and correct any misinformed assumptions.

Finding Refuge

In this section I outline how the Iraqi refugees maintain their culture and identity and illuminate the ways in which these are simultaneously changing or adapting to American society. A method of preserving their Iraqi culture is by recreating their neighborhood like their surroundings in Iraq, both inside and outside the house. In addition, their Iraqi culture is strongly visible in their use of food and drinks for interaction, their habits related to media, music and dance, their celebrations, their maintenance of Iraqi values in relationships and the family, and their religious life. I then explore the way integration is occurring and the struggles attached to settling in an unfamiliar place, like facing financial difficulties and issues with the immigration process.

Participants

Sawsan's family includes the father Bassam, the mother Dalia, the eldest sister Noor and the youngest sister Marina. They first left Iraq in 2004 to go to Syria for a year, but went back to Iraq thinking the situation improved. They left in a rush after having been threatened (Notes August 23, 2014)¹. They left for Syria again in 2006, and sold their home realizing they had to leave permanently. Noor and Sawsan were accepted to American

¹ Bassam worked for the United Nations. For this he was considered the enemy and threats included the kidnapping of his daughters.

colleges, and came to the United States separately from their parents. Noor came in 2009 to Kentucky, and in 2011 Marina and the parents went to San Diego, and Sawsan to Vermont (Sawsan Interview: August 23, 2014). Marina is engaged to Sabah whose parents, Yousif and Minerva, I interviewed. They went to Syria in 2007 and left in 2009 to go to El Cajon. Their other two sons are living in Sweden because they left Iraq earlier due to threats of being kidnapped. Kathy, a friend of the family, left Iraq in 1995 to come to San Diego. She does not have refugee status. San Diego therefore not only includes migrants from the 2003 war, but also other conflicts in Iraq. All the participants are from Baghdad, although some were born in Basra.

Surroundings

Many Iraqi refugees have clustered in the same neighborhood of El Cajon in San Diego. The area is even known as the “little Baghdad” of California. A quick search on “Google Maps” shows there are various Arabic markets in the area (see Figure 1). I visited The Valley Foods Market and North Park Produce. When we went shopping at the Valley Market, I saw how the grocery store and its items serve as mnemonics. Sawsan would smile and pick up items that brought back memories of her childhood in Iraq: apricot sheets, a certain kind of chewing gum and North Iraqi yoghurt (Notes August 23, 2014).

Besides Iraqis there are many Latin-American immigrants and piñatas were therefore hanging from the ceiling of North Park Produce. Catering to the diversity of El Cajon, these markets sell products from various places. The employees have to be bilingual to be able to serve the various clients (Notes August 22, 2014). The market had rows of glass boxes with different kinds of nuts, jars with tahini (ground sesame), halva or date syrup, hookahs, baklava, Iraqi bread and many more Iraqi and Middle Eastern products

and items (see Figure 2). Dalia receives flyers from Valley Foods with advertisements on which the mix of cultures and languages is visible (see Figure 3). Valley Foods follows American holidays (Labor Day sales), but the descriptions of the products were in English, Arabic and Spanish (although the Arabic is sometimes incorrect) (Notes August 26, 2014).

You can recognize the apartments and houses Iraqis live in, because they are the ones who always keep their door open. Iraqi culture heavily encourages socialization and interactions between neighbors; they make the expression of my door is always open a reality. Sawsan explained that “the Iraqis all live together” including Iraqi Muslims, Christians and other religions (Notes August 22, 2014). There do not seem to be any tensions between the groups, yet the people Sawsan’s family knows are predominantly Christian Iraqis. I visited three different apartments: Dalia and Bassam, Sawsan’s grandmother and Kathy’s homes. They surrounded themselves with Christian pictures, statues and prayers all over the interior of their apartments (see Figure 4). Around Sawsan’s house there were also many churches (see Figure 5). Family members would take their pick according to the church community rather than a specific branch of Christianity. Dalia does not attend the same church every time, not feeling bound to go to a Catholic church even though she considers herself Catholic. Marina goes to a church of her own choice, where she met her fiancée Sabah. Kathy, a friend of the family, specified that she goes to church on Sundays to socialize. Their preference therefore depends on the people attending the church, and because they feel more comfortable around other Iraqi immigrants they tend to avoid American churches.

Marina contemplated an American congregation, but she is not willing to leave her comfort zone at the moment. Based on the interviews, participants see their friends at

church events and Sunday mass, and feel more comfortable going to Middle Eastern congregations instead of American church groups in which they feel a weaker sense of belonging. From the map in Figure 5, one cannot see which one's are mainly Iraqi or mainly American congregations. However, the "Shadow Mountain Community Church" on the map is in fact called "Shadow Mountain: Arabic Congregation" (Notes August 30, 2014).

Mass is provided in various languages, including Arabic and Aramaic, which helps the forced migrants settle in El Cajon, but at the same time forms a barrier between Arabs and other locals. The majority of Iraqis that end up in San Diego are Christian and a significant aspect of how the Iraqi refugees are building their community is thus through their faith. This does not facilitate bonding with non-Iraqi Christians. There are separate services for Arabic and non-Arabic believers.

Culture and Identity from Food

The significant role of food and drinks was not only noticeable in the two markets I visited, but also in the preparation and consumption of meals by the family I stayed with. Social interactions are usually combined with sharing food. If it is not a meal, they will have tea or small snacks together as their way of welcoming guests. They reflect their strong family values, generosity and hospitality in the way they share food. In the markets people run into each other constantly and one of the main reasons Dalia visits her mother is to deliver groceries, and to enjoy a meal together as a family. Food and interaction cannot be viewed as separate among the Iraqi community.

The first interactions I had with Dalia was through the making of *takhratha* (Aramaic word for flat bread, see Figure 6). She showed me how she made the dough and then we topped it with cheese, mint, or a combination of thyme, oil and sesame seeds.

Sawsan recalled how they would cook *takhratha* above a fire during the war. They are thus to a large extent still eating the same food they ate in Iraq (notes August 23, 2014). At the end of my stay I cooked Mexican food for the family, which Noor had been asking me about since I got to San Diego. Bonding therefore takes place in presenting food, making it together and reciprocating the favor. When we accompanied Bassam and Yousif to fish, another Iraqi man came up to us and offered his fish to them. When I asked what happened, Sawsan emphasized the significance of generosity amongst Iraqi (notes August 30, 2014).

During the interview with Sawsan the value of generosity related to food also came up:

“I think I’m keeping, you know, some things like traditions, maybe trying to make people taste food and keeping this kind of traditions, Iraqi traditions, and sharing food with people, bringing sometimes, like uh, inviting people for dinners, take them out on my, like, money. This is something really Middle Eastern, I feel at least...not every foreigner I met or American does this, so I like this, to show them, you know, the generosity. Because it’s a nice thing you know. We have it back home, it’s nice to practice it...even though I’m the less generous actually, of all, everyone in my family. But still, compared to a lot of Americans...they consider me so generous” (Interview Sawsan: August 23, 2014).

She informed me of the values and traditions she wants to keep from Iraq and generosity with food is one of these values she makes an effort to maintain, as part of her identity. From the actions of all the Iraqis in El Cajon I met, including those examples provided previously, generosity is shown through food and drinks by all of them.

Media, Music and Dance

Noor who is most enthusiastic about American culture convinced us all to do Zumba in the living room of the house. Marina and Sawsan preferred belly dancing (Notes August 25, 2014). This is a small example of the way they still value music, dance and other types of media from the Middle East. We listened to all kinds of music on the radio,

but once in a while they wanted to play Arabic music. Noor and Sawsan showed me a video of an Assyrian wedding to show me the way they dance Khigga (the traditional Assyrian way of dancing). They informed me that this is how they would still dance at Assyrian weddings in San Diego (Notes August 27, 2014). Marina, who is engaged to Sabah, mentioned she would wear a dress in the Iraqi fashion and have a traditional Iraqi wedding (Notes August 25, 2014). According to Sawsan's family, weddings, Christmas and Eastern are celebrated as they did in Iraq. The ceremonies are tied to their Iraqi culture as well as their religion.

“It's not really religious values, but it's something they need to be familiar with and, uh, what values I would keep? You know like the Christmas stuff and the Eastern. I mean, general ones” (Interview Noor: August 26, 2014).

The TV was almost continuously on at Bassam and Dalia's house and at the grandmother's house when we visited her for dinner. Sawsan explained how the people she knows in El Cajon watch Iraqi/Middle Eastern TV shows because they include a lot of current events. In addition, Sawsan's family watches the Sharqiya news. One evening when we were all watching the news together they showed bloody images of the killings of “Turkmans” by ISIS (Notes August 22, 2014). Bassam recalled how jihadist ruined the lives of a family he knew and I witnessed the strong emotional reactions the family had in that moment (Notes August 22, 2014). They have difficulties distancing themselves from what is happening in their home country when they watch the news, clearly demonstrating their connection to Iraq. Even after leaving the country, the hardships occurring in Iraq remain impactful on the lives of the Iraqi refugees.

Not only do they keep up with Arabic TV shows and the Sharqiya news, but they also watch videos from and about Iraq to keep themselves informed of their country. They keep themselves updated on the art and history of Iraq. Sawsan wishes outsiders recognized

Iraqis as ordinary people and that Iraq is not only a country at war, but a country with a rich history and diverse personalities (Notes August 24, 2014). They watch American movies and listen to mainstream American songs, but the TV is often set on Arabic channels. Keeping the TV on throughout the day as background noise is characteristically Iraqi.

Relationships and Family Values

Almost all the participants incorporated the significance of family in one way or another. When I asked her what aspects of her Iraqi culture she preserves, Sawsan replied:

“what do I carry from Iraq? [asks herself]: respect, family, family values, the family connection, even though it’s so hard for me, as we said, the dependence, but I know that I need to come back at one point to be around my family, you know, and I appreciate that and I respect it, because that’s how I want my kids to be brought up. The same way, you know” (Interview Sawsan: August 23, 2014).

Similarly, being both emotionally and physically close to family is the most important Iraqi value maintained by Noor.

Although Minerva did not mention it directly she expressed that her happiness was incomplete because of the distance between her and her other two sons. She was psychologically tired, as she described it, because of the unwanted separation of her family. In her free time she calls her sons and her hope for the future is to be reunited with them.

Kim: “are you satisfied here?”

Minerva: [Arabic]

Sawsan [translates]: “she said, yes she is happy that she is here, but not really that happy because her other sons are not in America. So she feels like her life is still difficult.” Kim: “are they still in Iraq?”

Minerva: “no, Sweden.”

Kim: “why Sweden?”

Minerva: [Arabic]

Sawsan [translates]: “because they both were, like, they were [...] tried to be kidnapped, they had to be...they send them quickly to leave the country. So, the only place they could reach was Sweden, I don’t know. Like they went to

Sweden, and the parents were not able to get there. Anyway they build their lives there already...” (Interview Minerva: August 28, 2014).

Dalia expressed similar feelings about her life, informing me that she is not very satisfied with her situation as she is not able to visit her relatives without having American citizenship. Separation is one of the main struggles the Iraqi refugees face. As Noor stated: “we got scattered” (Interview Noor: August 26, 2014).

Bassam expressed the significance of family in maintaining his Iraqi culture. Relationships between him and his relatives remain strong, but he worries about the maintenance of culture in future generations.

Kim: “what are the main ways in which you keep your culture? What are the main values?”

Bassam: “first thing, my habits I bring it from Iraq, I think it keeps with me like the relations with people, relations with family. I always keep my relations with relatives, I at the same time try to take in developments in States, try to mix them together. But I will keep everything I brought from Iraq. I keep in myself, I try to keep in my daughters, in my grandchildren” (Interview Bassam: August 29, 2014).

An event that accurately portrays the emphasis on family connections is when Bassam went to the hospital for back pains. Immediately Dalia was constantly on the phone reassuring and being reassured by their Iraqi relatives, friends and neighbors. Yousif and Noor spent eight hours in the hospital waiting for Bassam until Marina, Sawsan and I went to take their place. Yousif, Marina’s soon-to-be father in law, felt it was his duty to support Bassam throughout the entire process (notes August 26, 2014).

Although the participants talked positively about their strong family values, it is significant to note this conversation between Noor and Sawsan:

Noor: “it’s been so hard since I graduated.”

Sawsan: “since you are stuck home?”

Noor: “no I have so many things...if I was on my own I would already have done whatever I wanted, but because I’m with them, you know I’m [...] like I don’t know, I could have gotten job in different state or something, I could have had more opportunities if I travelled to different state, if I went to New York or something.”

Sawsan: “yeah, so there is this thing about something, like always being with the family, very close to the family, like we have, they say, that was such a kind of weird decision for Middle Eastern families...to send their *daughter* [emphasized], not like men, daughters away, to live far away. People like always feel so sad for us, and people criticized” (Interview Sawsan: August 23, 2014).

Noor feels like she missed out on opportunities because of her sense of duty to stay with her family. People in the neighborhood already criticize them for travelling too far away.

Strong familial ties influence the way Iraqi migrants integrate. Refugees are placed in areas they have relatives so they have a support network once they arrive. Yousif explained how his sisters played a role in building their lives in San Diego:

Kim: “how did you find the available resources when you first came here?”

Yousif: [Arabic]

Sawsan [translates]: “he heard it from his sisters, they said they actually did not get that much, like at the beginning when they came. They got retirement, but also his sisters” (Interview Yousif: August 29, 2014).

Arriving in an unfamiliar place, one relies on the family bonds to cope with the situation.

Next to family, Iraqis quickly form or make an effort to preserve relationships with the people around them. In Iraq, ties between neighbors play a major part in daily life. However, they are not able to fully maintain this part of Iraqi culture in San Diego, though social interactions are still more apparent among Iraqis than the other residents of El Cajon:

Kim: “what do you miss most about Iraq?”

Dalia: “stability [continues in Arabic].”

Sawsan [translates]: “relationships with people. Because here everyone is so concerned about jobs and things.”

Dalia: “yes, and in house.”

Sawsan: “yeah, and here everyone is like in the house. People...it’s really different. Like, in the Middle East...even that we have all the time our doors open. Like a way to like, welcoming” (Interview Dalia: August 26, 2014).

Kathy also informed me that she missed the interactions between neighbors and the strong bonds between relatives and friends in Iraq (this interview was not recorded):

Kim: “how is your life different here than it was in Iraq?”

Kathy: “so different, better there [in Iraq] even with war” “[She described how she misses her friends/family] They live different here, it is hard to make friends with people of a different culture. They also work harder here without nice social time...”

Kim: “How have you changed since leaving Iraq?”

Kathy: “a lot, changed. Being alone here. You have to call before visiting people here [...] style of life, friends...we were closer. Here they think much more about money” (Interview Kathy: August 27, 2014).

As mentioned in the section on the surrounding, Iraqis still keep their doors open most of the time and people were constantly visiting each other. The only close relationship between an Iraqi and non-Iraqi I saw during my stay in San Diego (besides my own), was the marriage between an Iraqi woman (who is a friend of Dalia) and an American man.

Religious Life

Christianity plays a significant role in the culture and daily lives of the Iraqis in San Diego. Sawsan and Noor were most changed in that aspect of their Iraqi identity:

Sawsan: “oh one thing different, I’ll tell you for me, yeah for me specifically. If I were still home we would, I would definitely go to church all the time. I would be like one of those people who really have very high responsibilities in church. Not like as a priest, but very active you know, but then, you know, after world religions I took, I start to become very skeptical about every religion, information...every information I’m getting from a religion, so this changed me...”

Noor: “I feel I’m more well-rounded when it comes to religion, so, you know, I can practice mine, I don’t mind knowing more...you know, I’m interested in Buddhism a lot, you know, I have a lot of Buddhist friends, and that help a lot...”

Sawsan: “I was maybe a bit afraid of opening my eyes that wide when I was back home. But, here I’m not afraid, I just gave it a chance” (Interview Sawsan: August 23, 2014).

The stress that comes with being a refugee and experiencing war does not leave everyone’s faith untainted. Minerva replied in her interview that she stopped attending church shortly after arriving in San Diego:

Kim: “are you part of any religious group? Like a church”

Minerva: “orthodox....Armenian church [continues in Arabic]”

Sawsan: “first time she came here she was going to like, orthodox Armenian church, but not anymore. Like physically and psychologically she is tired...so she kind of like, shut down...she’s not interested anymore. So, she stopped” (Interview Minerva: August 28, 2014).

For Minerva, the change in her religious life is not a result of integration in the way Noor and Sawsan have changed due to their contact with non-Iraqi people in the United States, but because of the struggles she faced being separated from her sons.

Even though Christianity has played a less significant role in the lives of Sawsan and Noor, for Marina and others like her, moving to the United States has allowed them to express their beliefs more openly:

Kim: “how is your life different here?”

Marina: “small home, we got a small home here, we used to have a big home. Here there is freedom...more freedom.”

Sawsan: “independence, I think. Don’t say freedom....Americans will be happy. So proud of their country.”

Marina: “maybe more freedom for the religion. We can walk in the street and give people bibles.....I’m not jehova” (Interview Marina: August 25, 2014).

She enjoys spending her free time by attending Church events and participating in other church-related activities like working on hymns and reading the bible.

After hearing about more Christian Iraqi deaths, Bassam and Dalia prayed together with a number of Iraqi neighbors. Dalia lit a candle in the house with a picture of Jesus to pray for the Christian Iraqi lives lost. A sense of community is predominantly derived from being Christian Iraqi in El Cajon. Bassam and Dalia participated in a social event that was not Church-related, yet still a Christian Iraqi gathering (Notes August 28, 2014). The poster of Maria seen in Figure 4, was brought by Dalia and Bassam from Iraq and people in their hall would communally pray in front of it during the war. The poster is still considered a protector by Sawsan’s family and their community is still strengthened through group-

prayers (Notes August 24, 2014). Just like food and drinks cannot be considered separate from social interactions, the same applies to the Christianity of the Iraqis.

Although Noor, Sawsan and Marina repeated on various occasions that their family is relatively open-minded when it comes to religion, Noor and Sawsan struggle to gain acceptance from their father with regards to their boyfriends. Moving to the United States has formed a small rift between the daughters and Bassam. Although there is no significant change in their bond, it demonstrates a generational difference and the transformation Sawsan and Noor are going through. Sawsan and Noor went/are attending college and have therefore had to integrate to a higher degree than the parents. Sawsan is in a relationship with a Jewish-American and Noor with a Muslim. Sawsan emphasized that she understands her father's point of view, but Noor, who is having more difficulty with her father, purposefully never mentions her boyfriend near Bassam (Notes August 29, 2014).

The first thing that Marina thought of when I asked her about her Iraqi values and identity is that she will not have sexual relations until she is married:

Kim: "do you still feel close to your Iraqi culture? Values?"

Marina: "maybe, still living with my family until I get married, or if I study I come back. I cannot have a baby until I get married. I mean I have to be a virgin until I get married. Americans when I tell them that they feel jealous. 'ooh how do you do that?'"

Kim: "do you feel this is an Iraqi thing or a Christian?"

Marina: "this is Iraqi. it's Iraqi. Same thing with Muslim. Cause in Iraq if some girl is not a virgin and her dad know he might kill her."

Christianity amongst the Iraqi refugees is practiced in a variety of ways and forms a significant part of the cultural practices maintained by the Iraqi refugees in San Diego. The religion is used as a way to build community amongst the Iraqi in El Cajon and aspects of their Iraqi identity seem to be simultaneously tied to their Christian identity. Their social life, for example, is not only heavily influenced by their Iraqi identity and cultural practices,

but also by their shared Christian customs and sense of belonging to the Christian Iraqi community:

Kim: “what are the most important Iraqi values for you?”

Noor: “you know, being close to family. If I have my own kids one day, or my own family, definitely I’ll try to keep the values of letting my kids or whoever around me know who’s god...if they accept it’s fine, if not it’s totally ok...just to let them know. It’s not really religious values, but it’s something they need to be familiar with” (Interview Noor: August 26, 2014).

Instability and Financial Difficulties

Even though the Iraqi refugees came from an extremely unstable situation, most of the participants described their life in the United States as unstable. This feeling derives from the unsure outcome of acquiring US citizenship and/or a job. Since most Iraqis in San Diego have only recently settled there, they battle with communication issues because of the language barrier and with the fact that their work experience is not recognized by employers. When I asked about their plans for the future, I would either have to change my question to wishes for the future or I would get the answer that they are living day by day.

Kim: “What are your plans?”

Dalia: [Arabic]

Sawsan [translates]: “They are living day by day, they don’t have resources to plan something, you know, cause she’s like we will buy a house, but this is not something that can really....it’s more like a wish” (Interview Dalia: August 26, 2014).

One of the main issues Iraqi refugees struggle with is financial instability. When I asked Kathy about the difficulties of coming to San Diego she replied that besides language and cultural differences, finding a job was an issue. She graduated in Chemistry in Iraq, but had no experience in the United States. She ended up going back to school to attain a degree in child development. This made finding a job easier and she now works in daycare (Interview Kathy: August 27, 2014). Similarly, Bassam informed me:

Kim: "What has been most difficult about coming here?"

Bassam: "No, for me I didn't find any serious difficulties, but you know at the beginning when you come here everything is different when you know in my country, but this is really I found difficulty is the work...because till now, when I came to states my age is over 50 and then I have no experience in this country. I have experience in my country, but they don't care...when I looking for work or job, they are just asking about your experience I told them I have in my country, they said no we want from states. I don't have" (Interview Bassam: August 29, 2014)

Yousif expressed worries related to both financial insecurity and becoming a US citizen:

Kim: "What are your main worries at the moment?"

Yousif: [Arabic]

Sawsan: "His biggest worry right now is that his wife is not on retirement yet, like, not retirement...she doesn't have a salary yet and if Sabah will get married he will be responsible for a family so he cannot just support them because he will have his own. So, mostly financially [...] He said I'm living, you know, and he's gonna practice to take the exam of citizenship...so become a citizen that's his hope. When this hope or wish comes true then we will see what's gonna happen next" (Interview Yousif: August 29, 2014).

Marina had to start working earlier than she would have in Iraq since the financial situation is difficult (Interview Marina: August 25, 2014). Of significance is that this focus on working, is not always perceived as negative. However, the difference between Iraq and the United States is still noted which means they are very conscious of this change:

Kim: "how is your life different here than it was in Iraq?"

Noor: "[...] being more independent, you can express your opinions, uh, having the freedom of speech maybe. But mainly more independent than normal...like, if I was home, you graduate college and then that's it...you work, you work, if not I mean you're family will be spending on you. Now it's temporary that I'm not working. But, sooner, soon enough I have to have my own job so I can be independent. That is something I'm thankful for" (Interview Noor: August 26, 2014).

Although many would assume the situation of the forced migrants is significantly more stable than their life in conflict torn Iraq, this is a false presumption. The distance between the members of a family are almost constantly felt and thus they carry the fear of not attaining citizenship, as this would mean not being able to visit their relatives outside

the United States. Moreover, there is the worry to find work that pays enough to support the family and not being sure when or how much the family will expand (like the example of Yousif being worried about money when his son Sabah marries).

Integration

Various aspects of living in San Diego were described as similar to living in Iraq. Several replied that the weather is almost the same and Sawsan expressed how the palm trees bring her back to Iraq, although there they would be able to pick dates from the trees (Notes August 24, 2014). This can serve as a fitting metaphor for how their lives have changed. In El Cajon they are still surrounded by other Iraqis, Iraqi food, Iraqi clothing stores, etc. They feel like not much has changed and that they do not need to integrate as they are not really surrounded by American society. On the other hand, they experience feelings of instability and sadness because of the way many family members have been separated and because social relationships are considered more limited in San Diego. The palm trees, the appearance of an Iraqi neighborhood, is incomplete as the dates are missing.

Positive opinions regarding American culture were not absent. All informed me that they feel safer here and have no desire to go back to Iraq as long as the situation remains problematic. While feeling some loss and worries, they recognize that they have found refuge away from the dangers in Iraq and Syria. Kathy expressed how the freedom, the weather and not being scared, are the positive aspects of her life in San Diego. Yousif does not miss Iraq because his life there was dominated by hardships and wars. Noor and Sawsan who have immersed themselves the most into American society, emphasized how they appreciate the increased independence they have in the United States, and Marina enjoys the higher degree of religious freedom.

The Iraqi refugees do not think they will lose their Iraqi identity and culture even though most of them might not return to Iraq. When I asked Minerva, who does not feel like she is integrating, if she worries about losing her Iraqi identity, she replied that she won't forget it. Yousif who feels like he is integrating to a certain extent, stated: "I do not deny that I'm from Iraq, that I lived in Iraq, but I do not mind living here and just get used to the new environment so I think in a way it's integrating" (Interview Yousif: August 29, 2014). Noor, who feels integrated into American society, informed me that she will not lose her identity because she is proud to be Iraqi and will maintain her Iraqi values.

The level of integration does not influence their feeling of being Iraqi. All participants were convinced they would not lose their identity. If they had concerns it was about the next generations. Both Noor and Sawsan mentioned pride when talking about their Iraqi identity and Yousif and Minerva talked about preserving it through remembrance. They maintain their Iraqi identity through practices. They seem to connect the Arabic language, their Christianity, their traditions and values, to their identity. Sawsan who speaks English most of the year, makes an effort to keep her Arabic up to standard:

"when I say I'm Iraqi what do I mean by this? [asks herself]...oh, writing. Arabic language. I, like for me, I took courses in Arabic, like a 400 level for people. I just took it so I can keep the language well because I always wanted to maintain and, because you know, it's the language the main mean of communication, and I always try to be...an Arabic tutor, work, I go to Arabic table so I can speak, I made myself visible to people who take Arabic, Arabic students, to professors in Arabic. [...] So, this is just acknowledging my Arabic-ism, or whatever you call it" (Interview Sawsan: August 23, 2014).

Sawsan actively keeps up the value of generosity and her Arabic, but with other aspects of her culture/identity, even though she wants them to change, that would be crossing a line for her. Although she aspires to attain the objective or international perspective regarding

political matters, she does not want to completely change the way she thinks because she expressed it to be part of her Iraqi identity:

“uh...politically. It’s hard, but I try to like, try to be more open-minded. At least, about Israel things, you know the conflict, because this one if you are Arab...it’s just easy to blame Israel about things, and the US. This I feel I have changed a lot and even though I have been brought up in a community like this, I am not even ready...I am already doing it, I throw away these views. I keep it because I live there and I understand their Arab mind, but I’m trying to adopt the other mind which is mostly not American really, like I hope to gain the international view on what’s going on. Yes, so, But I still believe in, you know, conspiracy theory, something I brought from home I feel and I don’t want to throw it away because I do know how important is my land...[laughs] it’s just crazy, but I love my country, yeah” (Interview Sawsan: August 23, 2014).

After answering that she would definitely not lose her Iraqi identity, she revealed that there are cultural conflicts taking place within her. Sawsan and Noor’s changed opinions on dating, result in minor conflicts between them and their parents (Interview Sawsan: August 23, 2014). Bassam and Dalia do not believe their own identity changed, but are now clashing on opinions with their daughters because they are more integrated (like the conflict between Bassam and Noor about her relationship with a Muslim). Marina who came directly to El Cajon with her parents, in contrast to her sisters, still retains her ideas about dating and marriage from Iraq.

The feelings towards integration revealed by the participants varied. Sawsan informed me that she would not mind integrating, but that her different culture and life experiences make it complicated to interact with some Americans:

Kim: “do you feel you’re integrating or integrated into American society?”
 Sawsan: “not fully, but yeah. I am only integrated with Americans who have had an international experience. So not fully Americans, it’s kinda hard for me because, it’s just really hard for someone who never left to communicate with someone who has gone through so many different places and cultures [...]”
 Kim: “are you doing anything special to integrate?”
 Sawsan: “I’m in an American university. College. I have a lot of American friends. Like boyfriend. American Jew boyfriend [laugh].”

Kim: “what does it mean to you, integrating?”

Sawsan: “For me it’s like the willingness. My willingness to be found in a places were American exist and then their, as you said, their willingness to be welcoming to this new individual who is actually interested in knowing about them. So, it’s like a back and forth, you know. Being patient” (Interview Sawsan: August 23, 2014).

Even though she goes to an American college she informed me that she often felt misunderstood by her professors. They would think she was not interested in class because she would not go talk to them or ask questions, but for Sawsan it feels strange to do this as in Iraq one should distance oneself from professors:

Sawsan: “I still have this Middle Eastern mindset, like, you know, some of it: like you don’t speak up too much, you don’t argue with your professor and it’s hard [...] to like, convince your professor that you are not someone who is just not interested, but you just simply don’t do it because it’s impolite. So this kind of cultural differences” (Interview Sawsan: August 23, 2014).

The idea that integration is a back and forth process resonates with participants like Minerva and Bassam. They are not sure Americans want them to integrate and that there is a clash in the way relationships between people are understood. Bassam feels he can only form shallow relationships with Americans:

Kim: “do you feel like you are integrated or integrating into American society?”

Bassam: “not so much you can say, I can integrate with people but there is nothing to do these days.”

Kim: “what do you think it means?”

Bassam: “yes I can, because I have the ability”

Sawsan: “no [Arabic explanation]”

Bassam: “I can integrate with American people, I can deal with them easy for me and, but it depend on the other side. Are they accepting me or not, I’m not sure. But, up to my knowledge Americans are easy to have as friends but they don’t make any relations...deep relations. Because we are Iraqis, when we make relations with people, we keep the relations many years, we don’t forget [...] when I meet it doesn’t just mean just hi and not anything, no, we remember and keep in touch again. This is our habit.” (Interview Bassam: August 29, 2014)

The barriers to integration seem to be cultural differences in how one interacts with people and form relationships. According to Minerva it could also be some closed-mindedness from the part of the American locals. This is similar to what Sawsan expressed about integration. She feels she can only interact on a deeper level with Americans who have some international experience. Bassam and Kathy struggle to get jobs and therefore feel a separation between them and Americans whose work experience does get recognized. Although language seems to be a barrier as well, the main cause for the feelings related to integration are cultural clashes and/or misunderstandings.

The view that Americans have more shallow relationships was also expressed by Noor:

Kim: “did you make new relationships quickly?”

Noor: “I have more American international friends than Iraqi, besides the ones that came with me from Syria. And it was very easy, it is very easy for me to make friends here. Yeah so far that was not a problem for me. But, of course, some of them are shallow friendships. Especially the new ones, after college” [...]

Kim: “do you feel like you are integrating or are integrated into American society?”

Noor: “yes [...] cause I see myself fitting in that society more than the Arabic society. Cause usually stronger girls, stronger personality people don’t fit that much in our culture you know. I mean I don’t want to stereotype, but, usually. So that’s why I like it here more” (Interview Noor: August 26, 2014)

Noor is the only one who gave a certain “yes” when asked whether she was integrating. She spoke most positively about American culture and with her craving for independence and interest in health-related activities, she feels like she actually fits in better with the American culture than the Iraqi culture. Sawsan also mentions several ways in which she has been trying to adopt the American mindset. She struggles with the fact that in Iraqi culture, women are sometimes still viewed as less than men and the only jobs regarded with respect by Iraqis are being a doctor or engineer:

“maybe...well, it’s different for women. Some women, house women culture back home. They [many Iraqis outside of her family/friends) do still have this, the look of women less than a man. It is there, and I definitely don’t have it. And I try to throw it away as well. [...] And, education maybe. Education is important, which is everywhere, but you know this, like maybe still struggle with the idea of a doctor/engineer image. I’m over it completely, but sometimes it comes to my mind when I meet Iraqi people. Stupid people, they think I’m not smart enough because I did not do medicine. [...]But then, you know, like these things I hate about my culture...that doctor and engineer is the best form of what you could be” (Interview Sawsan: August 23, 2014).

In contrast, Kathy replied a firm no even though she has been a resident in the United States the longest. Most participants, like Kathy, do not feel like they can or have to integrate since El Cajon is so crowded with other Iraqi refugees. More significant than the barrier of cultural differences is thus the fact that integration, a difficult and slow process, is not required for the Iraqi refugees to live in San Diego. They do not see the point of integrating. Marina believes she will only integrate if she leaves El Cajon and its Iraqi community.

Although Dalia did not say it directly it seemed like she could integrate more easily if she learned English. But, she does not really see the need to better her English when residing in El Cajon (Notes August 24, 2014). Yousif took English classes, but this only expanded his network of Iraqi friends (his fellow students). According to Noor, Dalia is very sociable with Americans and would be able to integrate, but it is not necessary in El Cajon. Bassam had a similar point of view as he said in his interview: “I have the ability.”

The support networks the Iraqi refugees had when first arriving in San Diego were mainly from their relatives or family friends. Dalia and Bassam’s family received help from organization like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Iraqi Student Project (ISP, for Noor and Sawsan), but once they got to the United States they were largely on their own. Bassam complained about the way in which they received money for the first

three months while he looked for a job, but that they expected him to pay them back directly after those months. Bassam got the most help from the Chaldean and Middle-Eastern Social Services (CMSS) that was founded by an Iraqi and is made up of almost all Iraqi volunteers and workers (Interview Bassam: August 29, 2014). The help they receive is thus almost strictly from each other, which also strengthens the Iraqi community. Their goal is to help Iraqi refugees integrate through language and understanding how the official procedures of hospitals, offices, and other similar places function:

Kim: “what are the main concerns that the Iraqis are facing?”

Bassam: “like you said, to help people who are not integrating with the American people. Or with...try to help Iraqis who have problems with offices, official offices. Because they are coming...too many people bring envelopes they get in the mail and they don't know what to do. Just, they bring them...sometimes they sign, but they don't know what they are doing. So, the people do nothing and bring the mail, sometimes they pay money for nothing cause they don't understand.”

Sawsan: “it's funny cause sometimes they got a parcel and they did not know what to do, they are so scared. So it makes it hard for them because this...one time there is an old man who came who says he has a medical problem with his liver, ‘yes, but what is there in your liver?’ [...] he [Bassam] needs to study the case of the disease he's having so they can help him with the hospital so they know what help he needs. So, their job is more than just translating, you study people's problems”

None of these issues were raised by the Iraqi refugees I interviewed, but these are other struggles the community faces that should be considered.

It might have helped the forced migrants to be in Syria before coming to the United States. For all participants, except Kathy, this was the case, as they already had some experience with being foreigners although still living in a Middle Eastern country (Sawsan Interview: August 23, 2014). Younger generations find it easier to integrate than older generations. This is clear from the level of English spoken by Dalia's mother compared to Bassam and Dalia, and compared to the youngest generation including Noor, Sawsan and

Marina who increase their English through their education (Noor and Sawsan) or their jobs (Marina).

Discussion

The results shed light on the way the concepts of refugees, migration, community, integration and identity apply to the Iraqi refugees in San Diego. The data collected demonstrate that refugees not only struggle during the in-between period of seeking refuge, but still face instability when they settle in a new place such as San Diego. In addition, the Iraqis who attain official refugee status do not include all Iraqis that were forced to migrate. I label these people refugees because they still fall under the UNHCR (2000) definition of people that had to flee due to fear of persecution. There are a multitude of concepts related to migration and refugees, but of significance is that these labels are not as clear-cut in reality as they are on paper. As mentioned before, the UNHCR (2000:280) states that once the Iraqi refugees arrive in the United States they share the neighborhoods they settle in with immigrants from different countries and circumstances. Although integration into a place like San Diego is indeed a long-term solution, participants like Bassam and Kathy were unsatisfied with the limited help received when they arrived in the United States. There are few networks and resources outside their own Iraqi community to help them adapt. They were forced to leave their jobs and often most of their possessions, but when they receive asylum from the United States, there is no recognition for their previous work experience. Organizations and the American locals who group all migrants together, overlook the struggles and daily lives unique to the Iraqi refugees.

The Iraqis create feelings of stability through their community formation and their surroundings filled with Iraqi culture. However, they still experience instability due to

financial difficulties and the uncertainty of gaining citizenship. The way Iraqi refugees view the future is significantly different than the average person. They live day by day instead of planning for the future. They have some wishes and hopes, but keep these under control, taking on a more doubtful perspective towards the future.

On the other hand, they describe the United States as providing them with a higher degree of freedom compared to Iraq. Freedom to several of the participants means the stability of being out of danger, out of the conflict zone. Their lives are stable compared to Iraq, but it is significant to note that they describe this as freedom rather than security or stability. They understand freedom this way because they are free from the instability of danger, but not from other forms of instability (e.g. financial). Sawsan and Noor added that they have more freedom in the sense that they have more independence and that there are more opportunities for women in the United States than in Iraq. Marina brought up the fact that she feels more religious freedom. This could be a result of the fact that in Iraq they were part of a Christian minority group which they no longer are in the United States. The different mindset carried by the Iraqi refugees regarding their uncertain futures and their specific ideas of freedom should be considered when attempting to understand their situations and points of view.

Although they are no longer directly in danger from the Iraqi conflict. The conflict remains impactful to their lives. They see the massacre of Iraqi Christians and other Iraqis on the news, as well as the destruction of their prized monuments and art. This is a struggle in their lives, but at the same time also contributes to the strengthening of their community.

Of significance is to draw connections between these concepts of community, identity, integration, forced migration and refugees, and understand how they shape the

daily lives of the Iraqi population of El Cajon. The community formed by the Iraqi refugees is indistinguishable from their flexible individual identities. Identity to the Iraqi participants is not only tied closely to their home-country, but also to their Christianity. Their Iraqi identities should therefore not be considered without their religion. Although their Iraqi identity seems to be at the forefront in the way they present themselves, it is significantly intertwined with their Christian Iraqi identity. Community is built through connections preserved and created in the churches they attend and strengthened by praying together for the tragedies still occurring in Iraq. Many participants I interviewed emphasized that they are open-minded regarding their faith and so the significance of their Christianity is mostly in how it builds their community and strengthens their relationships. Iraqi Christians are also subdivided into groups, like Assyrians, Chaldeans, or like Yousif and Minerva's family who are Armenians (many having their own language as well as Arabic). Although some of them do attend specific churches they are still all considered part of the Christian Iraqi community.

Their Iraqi identity is both maintained through embedded practice and discursive knowledge of what it means to be an Iraqi. This knowledge is characterized by pride and acknowledgment of one's roots in Iraq. Simultaneously, they actively preserve their identity through Christianity and their values regarding family and social life, language and their habits. For Noor and Sawsan, who often live outside the community and have most contact with American society, these aspects of their Christian Iraqi identity are more difficult to preserve.

Although not without worries, the other participants do not feel the necessity to integrate into American society because of their safe haven in El Cajon. Even the

organizations like the CMSS was founded and is made up of mostly Iraqis, helping and supporting each other. Small aspects of their lives have remained the same, like the weather, the shops and foods they have around, the languages and even some of the people. Some of these might not seem significant, but to the Iraqis living in El Cajon they contribute to their level of comfort.

Family is the most important support network for the Iraqi immigrants. They settle in places they have relatives who can help them with the initial steps of familiarizing themselves with their new surroundings. Besides family, relationships between neighbors and friends (predominantly other Iraqis), some friends they knew from Iraq and some new acquaintances, are vital to alleviating their worries. Community is highly valued by the Iraqis interviewed in El Cajon. Many participants, like Bassam and Noor, informed me that they did not receive much help from Americans and that organizations mostly focus on getting the refugees to the United States, but do not really help them once they arrive. Issues that appear minor, like attending doctor's appointments and understanding and answering their mail, are overlooked by many non-Iraqis as they only receive help from Iraqi organizations. These issues are not only tied to language, but to cultural differences. On the other hand, every participant is still struggling with the way in which their families are scattered across the globe. Dalia who misses her sister, and Minerva who misses her sons and missed the birth of her grandson, cannot feel fully satisfied with their life. Moreover, relationships between neighbors are still weaker than they were in Iraq, which all participants significantly missed about their home-country. The weaker bonds might be due to the mixing of cultures in the area, the gap left by the relatives in other areas of the world, and/or the fact that many have to work more hours to maintain financial stability.

In addition to not feeling a necessity to integrate when living in a place with many other Iraqi forced migrants, the participants were skeptical about the willingness to be accepted into society. Sawsan and Noor relate better to international students or Americans with travel experience and exposure to different cultures. They therefore believe closed-mindedness to be an obstacle regarding integration. Bassam and Kathy feel a barrier between them and American society because their work experience from Iraq is not recognized in the United States. Of significance, none seem to struggle with racism as it was never mentioned among the difficulties faced in the United States. Although trust or willingness to accept is lacking, likely from both sides (Iraqis and Americans), it is not clearly visible in individual interactions between Iraqis and American locals.

From the literature review, it appears integration of Iraqis into American society has not been studied thoroughly. To the Iraqi refugees integration is tied to acceptance, interacting on a deeper level with American locals and being surrounded by American society - to feel part of it. These are currently not the case for the Iraqi settled in El Cajon. Minor ways of integrating have been taking place in El Cajon. Although many thought integration is not happening and/or will not happen in San Diego, and they simultaneously maintain their Iraqi identity and community, integration is still taking place. I met a married couple of an Iraqi with an American and Sawsan and Noor are dating non-Iraqis. Social life is so strong among Iraqis, many have formed relationships with Americans although these are often considered to be shallower than relationships between Iraqis.

Noor is learning all about nutrition and asked me to cook Mexican food since she has grown to love spicy food. There seem to be generational differences in the levels of integration, visible from the knowledge of English possessed by the Iraqis I met during my

stay in San Diego. The older generations (like the grandmother) speak only a couple of words and the generation of the granddaughters/daughters (in their 20s) speak fluently or almost fluently. But, to all participants including the further integrated Sawsan and Noor, their Iraqi identity, values and culture is highly important and they therefore consciously and unconsciously (the mindset and the embedded practices) maintain their Iraqi identity and culture through food, relationships, values of family and generosity, the media, traditions of music, dance and celebrations, and their religious life.

Conclusion

I address the question: ‘how do Christian Iraqi refugees maintain their identity and form a sense of community while integrating into American society: what struggles arise with this paradox?’ To do so, I studied forced migrants and the embedded practices of their Iraqi culture in their daily lives and community formation. I conducted eight interviews and carried out participant-observation in El Cajon, San Diego, to better understand the positive and negative aspects of the new-build lives of the Iraqi refugees. Attaining a visa to come to the United States is not where their story should end in the eyes of researchers and the rest of the world. Although the Christian Iraqis find a higher degree of freedom in religion, independence and being out of danger of persecution in the United States, they all feel instability in their current lives. Financial insecurity and the uncertainty of attaining American citizenship puts stress on the Iraqi population in El Cajon. Many family members have also received asylum in different countries, involuntarily having to separate, which leaves feelings of loss. They do not leave their past behind in the Middle-East, but are still

heavily impacted by the conflict in Iraq and their identity is still largely characterized by their Christian Iraqi identity.

Their culture and identity is preserved through their Iraqi habits regarding food and drinks, the media, music and dance, their values of family and neighborly relationships, and their religious life. These are all both connected to the individuals as well as their community, making the two strongly intertwined. Their surrounding is catered to all these needs and traditions as El Cajon includes various markets, shops and churches where Iraqis form and preserve their community relationships. Integration is thus limited by the similarities between Iraq and El Cajon, the connections formed between Iraqis and the disconnect between them and the American locals and/or the lack of acceptance (e.g. work, organizations, etc.). Minor ways of integrating are taking place and there are generational differences in the levels of integration. The younger generations who attend school or college and/or have jobs, learn the English language more easily and are surrounded by a higher number of non-Iraqis. However, the relationships formed with non-Iraqis are mostly with other minorities or Americans with international experience. These generational differences result in some clashes in opinions between parents and their children.

This research can be expanded by including a higher number of participants and comparing different Iraqi communities. Including more male perspectives would provide more balanced results between men and women. These comparisons can be made between different areas of the United States where Christian Iraqis have settled, or between different religious groups among the Iraqi refugees in specific places. One could also look more into linguistic anthropology. The Iraqi refugees code-switch between English and Arabic depending on the situation. Furthermore, the younger generations (the interviewees in their

twenties) knew significantly more English than most parents and grandparents. Sawsan's grandmother has lived in San Diego the longest, but knew the least amount of English. Speaking English can thus be tied to integration. In addition, some Iraqis speak the Chaldean language to each other instead of Arabic, which creates some sub-divisions among the Iraqis in San Diego. Furthermore, social media plays a significant role in maintaining Iraqi relationships, culture and identity. I could have looked at the posts on Facebook shared by the Iraqi refugees as they often include political and personal messages to mourn the victims in Iraq and the destruction of Iraqi culture, history and art, and to make people understand that there is more to Iraq than its conflicts.

Roots for many Iraqi refugees are highly valued and they therefore maintain pride in being Iraqi. To understand the individual one must therefore also understand the traumatic experiences they carry with them, their traditions, values and connection to their home-country. Even though many recognize they will never return to Iraq, their identity remains tied to their roots and the strong feeling of community they share is a significant aspect of their daily lives. Sensitivity to the situation of the Iraqi refugees will assist in catering to their needs and facilitating integration. The Iraqis in El Cajon present other ways of understanding the concepts of refugees, migration, community, integration and identity which adds to existing research on forced migration. Part of Iraq's history and culture, which so heavily suffers under the conflicts, remain present among the Iraqis who have left the country. One should note that the events in Iraq not only include the loss of lives, but also the loss of Iraqi history and culture, and it is the Iraqi refugees who play a significant role in maintaining and remembering their culture. The refugee crisis is a global problem as the people try to flee to various countries all over the world. It is therefore

difficult to manage and once the initial step of settlement is taken care of, not much thought is put on the following less pressing steps that should nonetheless still be taken to assist the refugees. The results of this thesis can help in determining what is needed and provides a look into the lives of Iraqi refugees.

Appendix

Interview Questions:

What is your name?

Where are you from?

When did you leave Iraq?

How long have you been in San Diego? How long in the USA?

How long did you initially think you would be away from Iraq? How long in the USA specifically?

How long do you think you will be here now?

Had you travelled anywhere outside Iraq before?

Did you stay anywhere else as a forced migrant before coming to the United States?

Why were you accepted to come to the USA? Were they strict with immigration?

Why San Diego? Did you stay anywhere else in the United States?

Are you happy with your choice?

Do you know someone in San Diego that you met in Iraq?

What has been difficult about coming here? (forms, language, emotionally?)

How did you find the available resources?

What is your occupation right now? (studying, part-time or full-time job, etc.)

What was your occupation in Iraq?

How is your life different here than it was in Iraq?

Are there any problems that you face here because you are Iraqi?

What is your religion? Are you part of any religious group (church, mosque, etc.)?

Are you part of any other network that has helped you here?

Did you make new relationships quickly in San Diego? Is this mainly with the people in this neighborhood? Is it mainly with other Iraqi? Why?

What do you do in your free time?

Do you feel like you are integrating or integrated into American society? Why yes or no?

Do you want to integrate into American society?

Are you doing anything special to integrate into American society here? Why yes or no?

(What does integrating into American society mean to you?)

Do you worry about losing your identity? Do you still feel close to your Iraqi culture? If yes, how do you do this? (food, relationships, celebrations, etc.)

In what ways do you feel you have changed since leaving Iraq?

What are your main worries at the moment?

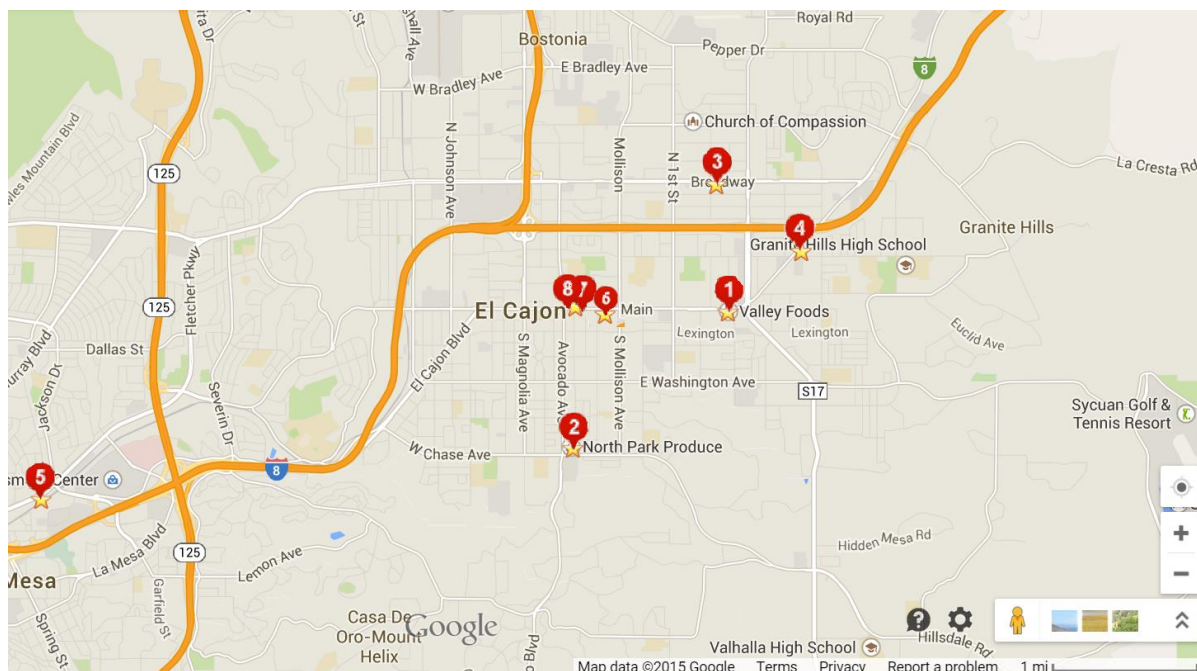
What is positive in your life at the moment?

What are your plans for the future?

Do you hope to go back to Iraq at some point?

What do you miss the most about Iraq?

Figure 1. El Cajon – Arabic Markets



1. Valley Foods

4. Kaelin's Market

7. Big Bear Produce

2. North Park Produce

5. Vine Ripe Market (La Mesa)

8. El Cajon
International Foods

3. Al Rafidain

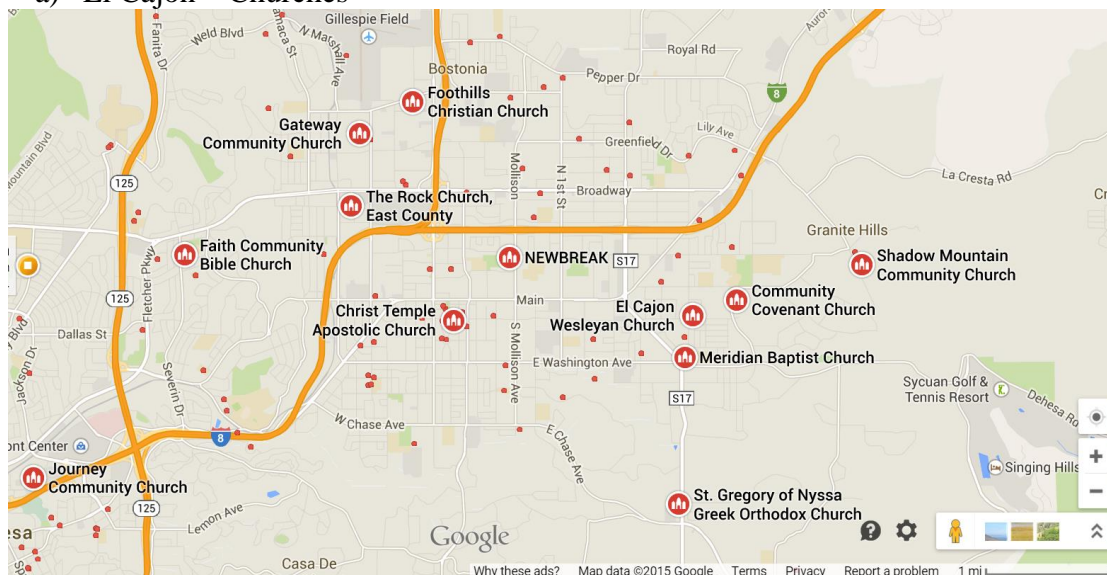
6. Bagdad Market

Figure 4. Poster of the Virgin Mary inside Dalia and Bassam's home

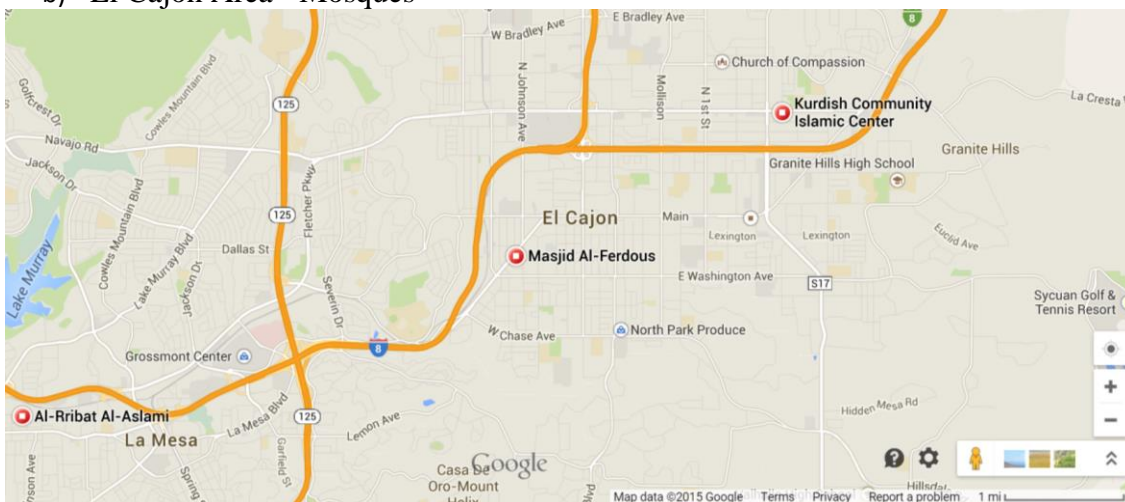


Figure 5.

a) El Cajon – Churches



b) El Cajon Area - Mosques



c) El Cajon Area - Synagogues
None in El Cajon

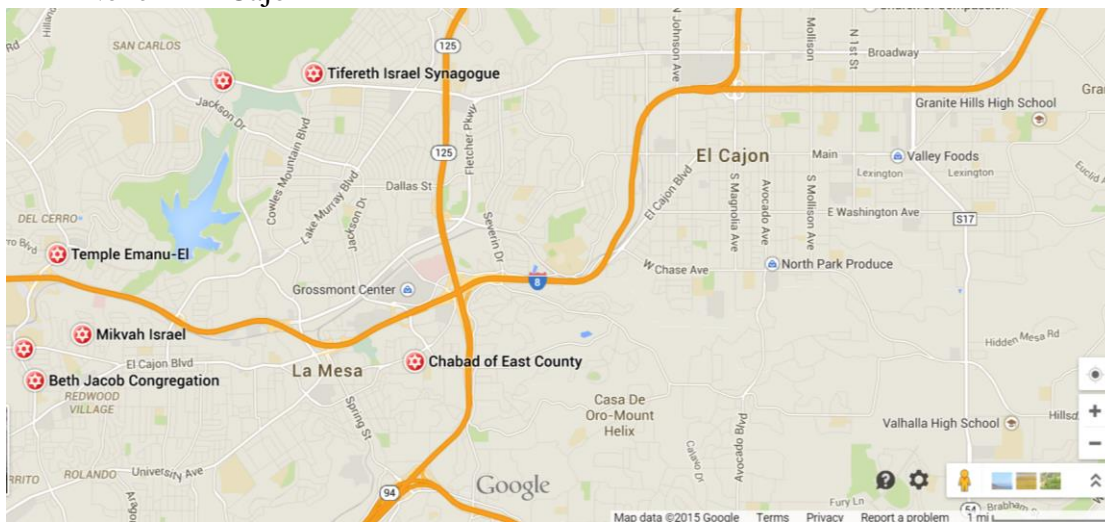


Figure 6. Takhratha



Figure 7. Sharqiya News on TV



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