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A SHARED STATE: IRAQI REFUGEES AND AMERICAN VETERANS IN THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

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ABSTRACT

The American media devoted primetime coverage to the military offensive in Baghdad in March of 2003 but as time passed the ‘War on Terror’ became an uneasy norm in American consciousness. Although the Iraq war swept through the lives of millions of Iraqi civilians and hundreds of thousands of American military families, few ethnographic studies document that aftermath. Furthermore, while veterans and refugees are the two largest populations affected by the war, no previous studies have analyzed both groups in concert. To that end, this paper is an ethnographic analysis of the war’s aftermath through the lived experiences of Iraqi refugees and American veterans in California. The research on which the study is based derives from twelve months of participant observation, group discussions, and qualitative interviews with refugees formerly of the Iraqi professional class who relocated to northern California after 2003 and, separately, with American veterans of the war who pursued bachelor’s degrees in northern California after leaving Iraq. The results of the study illustrate that the postwar situations of the two groups are surprisingly similar despite their divergent points of origin, with both experiencing a drastic change in professional opportunity, repercussions of trauma, and isolation. I argue that a reading of the narratives of refugees and veterans together, as mutually constitutive, is essential for a coherent view of the Iraq war and its multivalent aftermath.

Key words: Iraq war, War on Terror, California, Iraqi refugees, American veterans, professional development, trauma, moral injury, isolation

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My thanks extend to a few of the staunch advocates in the veteran or refugee communities who remain anonymous here to maintain the confidentiality of the study's participants but whose gracious introductions helped to successfully establish my research. I would like to thank my dearest friends for reading drafts of my work and for sharing this path with me at all hours of the day and night, including Gary Jaffe, Nadia Ghanmeh, Zoe Rudow, Victor Ray, Etai Wolins, Noah Zaves, my peers in MES 102, and the many other incredible people who have helped me along the way.

I am indebted to my family for supporting and loving me throughout. I am especially grateful to my mother, Anat, for giving me the best tools and always having faith, and to my father, Mike, for teaching me to keep an open mind.

Finally, and most importantly, this paper is dedicated to the American veterans and Iraqi refugees who shared with me their personal lives and inspired me at every meeting.

Americans have known wars, but for the past 136 years, they have been wars on foreign soil, except for one Sunday in 1941. Americans have known the casualties of war, but not at the center of a great city on a peaceful morning. Americans have known surprise attacks but never before on thousands of civilians. All of this was brought upon us in a single day, and night fell on a different world, a world where freedom itself is under attack.

–President George W. Bush
Address to Congress
September 20, 2001¹

¹ “Transcript of President Bush’s Address.” CNN. 20 Sep. 2001. Web.

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The United Nation in Syria, they told me, you have resettlement program... you are gonna go to the United States of America. I told them, I have not very good background with the United State, (*starting to laugh*) because I just run away from them, you know?... They told me, it's not your choice. United State, or go back to Baghdad.

–Mustafa, an Iraqi refugee²
California, 2011

The fact that I went to Iraq is what got me interested in Middle Eastern Studies. I never would have thought to care. It was the fact that we went where we went and did what we did.

–Brent, an American veteran
California, 2011

INTRODUCTION

On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked planes inside the U.S. and crashed them into the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Virginia, and a field in Pennsylvania, en route to the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. The Twin Towers were destroyed, thousands of people were killed, and the public was deeply shocked. The attacks came as a surprise to many Americans, but a growing body of scholarship sheds light on the connections between the long history of Western colonialism in the Arab world and the subsequent Muslim ‘terrorist’ operations that reached the United States. Distinguished scholars such as Rashid Khalidi,³ Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood⁴ have published works on the legacy of Islamophobia and anti-Arab tendencies in American culture and politics that contributed to the rise in targeted attacks against U.S. citizens. Khalidi, Hirschkind and Mahmood analyze

² All names pseudonyms.

³ Khalidi, Rashid. *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East*. Boston: Beacon Press Books, 2004. Print.

⁴ Hirschkind, Charles and Saba Mahmood. “Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 75.2 (2012): 339-354. Web.

how U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan operated under a pretense of promoting democracy and women's rights while furthering a neo-colonialist agenda of profit and power at the expense of the countries' nationals and, with 9/11, at the expense of the American people.

In the three decades leading up to the 2003 war, Saddam Hussein came to prominence in the Arab Socialist Ba'ath party and then assumed power as the president of Iraq, consolidating his control over the country with military might. He led Iraq into a protracted war with Iran from 1980 to 1989, which drained economic resources and brought enormous suffering to both sides. Saddam Hussein's rapid rise to power and the suspected development of nuclear weapons raised international concern. When he ordered the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the United Nations imposed economic sanctions on Iraq to encourage a military withdrawal and the dismantling of the country's weapons program. The sanctions established a full trade embargo, excluding most medical supplies and food, but many pesticides were restricted, which limited the country's agricultural capabilities and ultimately led to further suffering of the Iraqi people.⁵ Despite pressure from his country's citizens, Saddam Hussein largely refused to cooperate with the United Nations, turning instead to diplomatic relations with China and Russia to reduce the sanctions. At the behest of the U.N., the United States and a coalition of international forces intervened militarily in the Gulf War of 1991 to end Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. U.N. investigations the following year relayed that Saddam Hussein had likely disarmed most of the country's arsenals, but later evaluations cast some doubt on the country's compliance with a thorough inspection. In response to the report, in 1998 the U.S. congress passed the "Iraq Liberation Act," which supported the deposition of Saddam Hussein and the development of a democracy in Iraq.⁶ President Bill Clinton then authorized a stream of air strikes against various military and government targets in Iraq.

Meanwhile, the U.S. was also engaged in covert actions in other Arab and Muslim countries, which provoked the Saudi Arabian Osama Bin Laden to call for an end to the United States' anti-Islamic interventions.⁷ There was a subsequent rise in retaliations from the Arab world. Following the September 11th attacks, President Bush responded by announcing a 'War on Terror' that would locate and destroy all terrorist masterminds connected to the tragedy, including Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, as well as any countries that harbored terrorists. Within a month of the attacks, the President and his cabinet used the wave of American outrage and pride to initiate a war in Afghanistan. At the same time, Defense Secretary

⁵ Al-Ali, Nadjé Sadig. *Iraqi Women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present*. New York: Zed Books, 2007. Print.

⁶ Gregory, Derek. *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publications, 2004. Print.

Makiya, Kanan. *Republic of Fear*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. Print.

Tripp, Charles. *A History of Iraq*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Print.

⁷ Mahle, Melissa Boyle. *Denial and Deception: An Insider's View of the CIA*. New York: Nation Books, 2004. Print.

Donald Rumsefeld, Deputy Secretary of State Paul Wolfowitz and Vice President Dick Cheney were advising President Bush to take action against Iraq, despite limited evidence of the country's connection with the 9/11 attacks.⁸ Two years later, the U.S. military invaded Iraq under the claim that Saddam Hussein harbored 'weapons of mass destruction' and terrorist forces.

The American media devoted primetime coverage to the military offensive in Baghdad in March of 2003 but as time passed, the War on Terror became an uneasy norm in American consciousness. While the Iraq war swept through the lives of millions of Iraqis and hundreds of thousands of American military families, few ethnographic studies document that aftermath. Furthermore, while the majority of Iraqi refugees who moved to the U.S. since 2003 formerly belonged to the middle and upper classes in Iraq,⁹ there is a scarcity of research on their professional lives in the U.S. Similarly, a large number of the Iraq war veterans who enlisted in the military since 2001 are expected to pursue higher education,¹⁰ but there is a need for further research about the effects of their service abroad on their new lives as university students. Additionally, while veterans and refugees are the two largest populations affected by the war, no previous studies have analyzed both groups in concert. To that end, this paper is an ethnographic analysis of the war's aftermath through the experiences of American veterans and Iraqi refugees in California.

My research focused on refugees formerly of the Iraqi professional class who relocated to northern California after 2003, and on American veterans of the war pursuing their bachelor's degrees, also in northern California, after leaving Iraq.¹¹ This paper addresses several pressing questions. First, how did the war affect the personal and professional lives of the Iraqi refugees? Why did they move to the United States, a country that invaded their own, and how did they reestablish their lives? As for the veterans, what factors influenced their decisions to enlist in the military? How did the war impact their return to civilian life, and how did their deployments to Iraq affect their academic and professional pursuits? Of both groups, I ask how their stories are connected. What insight can an intertwined analysis offer into the aftermath of the conflict? Although veterans and refugees are seemingly unrelated, I argue that the defining features of the aftermath for each group are the same, with the majority of individuals

⁸ Mitchell, David, and Tansa George Massoud. "Anatomy of Failure: Bush's Decision-Making Process and the Iraq War." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 5.3 (2009): 264. Web.

⁹ "Iraq Report 10-274: Iraqi Refugees and Special Immigrant Visa Holders Face Challenges Resettling in the United States and Obtaining Government Employment." U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). 2010. Web.

¹⁰ Data is lacking on the specific number of veterans entering higher education, but DiRamio and Jarvis cite the American Council on Education's estimate in 2008 of an impending influx of approximately 2 million veteran students, including those who served on active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. DiRamio, David and Kathryn Jarvis. "Veterans in Higher Education: When Johnny and Jane Come Marching to Campus." *ASHE Higher Education Report* 37.3 (2011): 1. San Francisco: Wiley Periodicals, Inc. Print.

¹¹ The names of most cities, colleges, and universities are omitted to maintain participant confidentiality.

encountering a drastic change in their personal and professional lives, repercussions of trauma, and isolation from the general American public. I contend that a combined analysis of the veterans and refugees' experiences is essential for a coherent view of the Iraq war and its multivalent aftermath.

The research on which the study is based derives from twelve months of participant observation, group discussions, and qualitative interviews from May 2011 through May 2012. After meeting with approximately sixty individuals from each group as well as with supporters of their respective communities, I conducted detailed, one-on-one interviews with 13 of the Iraqi refugees and 13 American veterans. At that point, the study reached a certain saturation of data. There was intentional parity between the groups as well as an effort to balance the number of male and female participants. Seven Iraqi women and six Iraqi men were interviewed. Only one of the 13 veterans interviewed was female, due to a limited number of female veterans at my field sites.¹² The veterans were undergraduate students or recent graduates at the time of the study, all were in their mid- to late-20's, and a few were married. The majority was Caucasian and the remainder was of Hispanic, Asian or mixed descent. All of the veterans enlisted in either the Army or Marine Corps¹³ and deployed to Iraq at least once between 2003 and 2008, after which they applied to competitive universities in northern California, where they pursued their bachelor's degrees. As for the Iraqi refugees, all obtained a university degree in Iraq prior to their displacement by the war, after which they moved to northern California by 2010. There, they found that their Iraqi degrees were not valid in the American job market. All identified as practicing Muslims, with some who were Sunni and others who were Shiite Muslims. Religion was not a criterion for participation in the study, nor did each individual's particular sect seem to have significant bearing on his or her life before the war. The refugees varied in age from their mid-20's to late 50's, and all happened to be married, with at least one child. Field sites for this research included student club meetings and outside events for veterans, and community celebrations and private gatherings for the Iraqis. More casual conversations with participants were conducted mainly in their native languages, Arabic for the Iraqis and English for the veterans. For both, more formal interviews were primarily in English.

In order to analyze the veterans and refugees together, this paper first establishes their unique circumstances. Chapters One and Two examine each group separately, with a focus on their background, potential to access university degrees and related careers, and the drastic changes to their personal,

¹² I had hoped to interview an equal number of male and female participants or at least a representative ratio of the enlisted forces, but women constituted 14.1% of the enlisted force in the four services in 2009, according to the U.S. Department of Defense. They were only 7.7% of this study. Further research should be conducted on the unique experiences of female veterans. "Population Representation in the Military Service: Fiscal Year 2009 Report." U.S. Department of Defense. n.d.: 9. Accessed 4 Mar. 2012. Web.

¹³ Identifying classifications such as military rank for the veterans and specific job descriptions for the Iraqis are omitted when necessary for confidentiality.

professional and socioeconomic opportunities as the war and its aftermath unfold. Despite their differences, it becomes apparent in Chapter Three that the lives of these refugees and veterans are intricately connected through their shared experiences of change, trauma, and isolation in the aftermath of the war.

If I could've asked them something— what I'd wanna know is, were they grateful?

—Harold, an American veteran

CHAPTER 1.

IRAQI REFUGEES: AFTER THE TERROR

Of the millions of Iraqis displaced by the war, more than 62,000 refugees resettled in the United States after 2003.¹⁴ Approximately 12.4 thousand moved to California, nearly nine thousand moved to Michigan, and the rest were dispersed in smaller numbers to other states.¹⁵ The majority of those who relocated to the U.S. holds advanced degrees and had respected careers before the war.¹⁶ This chapter focuses on the aftermath experiences of a group of Iraqi refugees of the former professional class who resettled in California.¹⁷ A defining feature of that aftermath for these refugees was a drastic loss, which I describe as personal, professional, and status-based. The personal loss involves family members, friends,

¹⁴ The exact number of Iraqi refugees who resettled in the United States between fiscal years 2003 and 2011 was a total 62,353, according to my calculations from data provided by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. “Fiscal Year 2003 Refugee Arrival Data”-“Fiscal Year 2011 Refugee Arrival Data.” ORR. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Last updated 18 Jul. 2012. Web.

¹⁵ The total of Iraqi refugees that resettled in the U.S. between FY 2003 and 2011 was 12,384. *ibid.*

¹⁶ “Iraq Report 10-274: Iraqi Refugees and Special Immigrant Visa Holders Face Challenges Resettling in the United States and Obtaining Government Employment.” U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). 2010. Web.

¹⁷ A version of this chapter was first published in the *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal*. Wolins, Maia. “From Iraq to the US: A Refugee Trajectory.” *BUJ* 24:2 (2011). University of California, Berkeley. Web.

A paper based on this chapter is also published in the *Kroeber Anthropological Society Journal*. Wolins, Maia. “In the Aftermath of Terror: Iraqi Refugees, Loss and Life in California.” *KAS* 102 (*forthcoming*, 2013). University of California, Berkeley.

fluency with local culture, geographical affiliations, and possessions, most of which they were forced to leave behind. The professional loss includes their degrees, jobs and careers, which were no longer valid or accessible in California. Lastly, the loss of status relates to their having once held respected positions in Iraqi society with access to upward mobility, only to find themselves in some of the lowest strata. I examine this cumulative loss by analyzing the opportunities available to them as professionals before 2003, how the war disrupted and redefined those possibilities, and how the refugees managed their loss in California.

PREWAR PROFESSIONALS

Saddam Hussein was a controlling dictator, to the effect that the population of Iraq had few rights to free speech and limited individual choice. However, as the leader of the socialist Ba'ath Party, he also encouraged economic growth by ensuring that education was accessible to everyone in the country. For all of the Iraqis in this study, obtaining a quality education through the level of the university was a vital component of their lives and a primary requirement for their children's lives. Despite the repercussions of the sanctions and Saddam Hussein's dominating rule, the vast majority of Iraqis in this study was quite satisfied with the available opportunities and invested in their lives as professionals and members of the educated class.

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

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

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

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

A young Iraqi named Nabil was the only one to describe his life before 2003 as being very difficult. He is close to Zeinab in age and his family members are well-educated, but he and his siblings were raised in poverty because his father refused to affiliate with the Ba’ath Party. During the reign of Saddam Hussein, the transition from education to employment was very controlled for many in the professional class and involved forceful incentives to encourage affiliation with his regime. Nabil, along with several others, explained that aspiring professionals often only secured a job if they cooperated with the government, which meant at least some degree of participation in the Ba’ath Party.¹⁸

[My] dad is an engineer, but during Saddam’s time he couldn’t like– his salary couldn’t even afford us food. I remember him working as like different jobs like a taxi driver, or working in a factory.... They offered him a house, a car, and really high salary and he got really good deal, but it was on condition that he has to join the Ba’ath Party.... And he rejected it... cuz he felt like this was wrong.

After unsuccessful attempts to start his own business, Nabil’s father moved to the United Arab Emirates for a well-paid engineering job. He stayed there for a few years, supporting the family. Nabil had his basic needs met and his good grades earned him enrollment in a prestigious private school, but he had to endure the jibes of instructors who publicly shamed him for what they saw as his father’s lack of patriotism.

During that time, I remember that the most popular boys are the ones that are related to the regime over there. [...] Almost every one of my friends’ dads they [...used to] have really high positions in the government [...and] I was like the one whose dad deserted the country and was working in the United Arab Emirates.

¹⁸ One Iraqi refugee described that the government retained their diplomas when they graduated so that they would be less likely to leave the country. The government would withhold the degree certifications of students who graduated as doctors, for example, to prevent a brain-drain to more affluent countries of students who had benefited from the free education offered in Iraq. Many in this study described picking up their certificates as they were preparing to leave the country after the war began.

Nabil was dissatisfied with the poverty in which he and his family lived in and with the harassment they suffered from others in the educated class. He wished to move to the United States, where one of his aunts had immigrated before he was born. Mail from his aunt rarely made it through the government screening process and international calls were closely monitored, so he knew few details of the U.S., but he coveted a picture of his relatives on their farm. He dreamt of joining them. Nabil would ultimately make it to the United States, but it would be at the cost of the war.

A fourth Iraqi refugee, Karwan, was born several years after Mustafa, in the late 1970s. He was one of several in this study to relate to me his dissent with the Ba'ath Party, but, like the rest, he was fully invested in his life as a professional. His parents disagreed with the Saddam Hussein's politics so they ran a private business that served the local needs of their community rather than answering to the government. Karwan grew up aspiring to succeed, similarly, without capitulating to the demands of the Ba'ath Party. "For me and all my family, we were never ever involved in politician [sic] in any way. We just wanted to be like normal, civil people living in their city, that's it." At nine years old, he discovered an aptitude and love for English while listening to Canadian music. By the time he graduated from college, he was relatively fluent in the language. That skill proved remarkably useful when, on a whim, he applied for a job in government imports. Applicants were required to be Ba'athists but, Karwan said,

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

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

Nabil, Karwan and Nadia were the only ones in this study of 13 who were dissatisfied with their lives in Iraq before 2003. The majority, like Zeinab and Mustafa, was firmly invested in their positions in the educated class and pleased with their career-paths. The war would bring liberation from the regime but it would also devastate the country's infrastructure, elicit an enormous humanitarian crisis of displaced people, and cause irreversible changes in the lives and futures of those in this study.

AN UNEXPECTED WAR

Saddam Hussein and his regime limited Iraqi access to the outside world, banning cell phones and satellite dishes, and monitoring international mail. The government also attempted to control all news sources in the country, to the effect that there was limited information in 2003 about the likelihood of a war. An Iraqi woman named Huda had family members living abroad who called to warn that the U.S. military was preparing to invade. "Our media doesn't say anything about it.... Everybodies calls from the outside, 'There's gonna be a war, they gonna attack you, we are seeing the missiles, the *bowachir*– the navy, they're moving to the area....' So it's going to be definitely war. But when, nobody decides." By January, it was obvious that war was imminent. Huda left Baghdad and moved temporarily to Syria with her husband, children and her parents. "On March the war started, but we left in January because we were so scared." Her loss of safety was the first of many losses that she endured because of the war, beginning even before the American military officially asserted its presence in the country.

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

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

Later, when the explosions and eerie clatter of falling debris quieted in the early hours of the morning, they ventured outside to discover smoldering pieces of metal embedded throughout the neighborhood. A trail of devastation led to the carcass of an Iraqi military truck stationed nearby. The truck had been filled

with anti-aircraft missiles and had evidently been targeted and bombed in the night by one of the American or British planes it was meant to destroy, wreaking havoc in the surrounding residential neighborhood. Karwan and Nadia's chilling acceptance of impending death in the face of unpredictable explosions became a new way of life. That fear was shared by all Iraqis in this study and would extend as various manifestations of trauma even after they left the warzone.

Some in this study could not leave Iraq but were able to leave the main cities. Nabil and his family, for example, moved to a relative's farmhouse in the outskirts of Baghdad for safety. From there, Nabil watched the progression of the invasion on international news through the illegal satellite hidden in the house. Iraqi newscasters continued to faithfully report on the strength of Saddam Hussein's indomitable army, but Nabil saw foreign reports of the American, British and other foreign military operations in the country. He also watched from the window as American tanks rolled toward the capital city on the road nearby. He recalled wanting to go outside and talk to the American soldiers, to ask them about the music they enjoyed listening to, among other mundane matters, but he knew that it was too dangerous. Nabil was one of the few who told me he watched with excitement as his country was liberated from its oppressive dictator but the next few years would still be dangerous for him, as they would be for all in the country.

Many related stories of death and injury among friends and family members. Mustafa described how his wife's brother, Bashar, was killed by American troops on the first day of the war as he returned home from work.

What happened in Iraq after the occupation for American troops in 2003: they came and they destroyed. They— at the first time they shooting everywhere. By the way, my brother-in-law [was] killed at the first day, the first three hours from the war, he just killed without any reason. Just tried to came back home, and they just shooting on any moving thing on the street. Just 27 years old, and he has three kids.

According to Mustafa's wife, Noor, her brother disliked Saddam Hussein but he nonetheless lost his life at the hands of the military whose very objective was to remove Saddam Hussein from power. The total number of Iraqi fatalities remains unknown but estimates as of 2011 place the death toll above 125,000.¹⁹

In May of 2003, despite the imminent escalation of violence and the accompanying deterioration of national stability, President Bush announced the end of major combat operations and declared the offensive a success. Life slowly continued in Iraq but the country was functioning well below its prewar

¹⁹ Based on Crawford's conservative estimate of all Iraqi deaths related to the war. For a range of estimates, an investigation into the lack of data about civilian deaths, and the politics and various methods used to determine the totals see Crawford, Neta C. "Civilian Death and Injury in Iraq, 2003-2011." *Costs of War*. Watson Institute. 2011. Web.

levels, with only a few hours of electricity each day, contaminated drinking water, and scarce resources. Everyday activities like buying groceries suffused with stress and many businesses that had successfully operated prior to the war were forced to close because of poor security. The American military was one of the few remaining sources of stable employment.

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

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

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

Zeinab, the lab technician, lost her job in 2003 like many others. It was too dangerous for her to travel to the university because of unpredictable battles and deadly explosions throughout the streets of Baghdad, so the laboratory had to release her. She had been invested in her work and was upset by the interruption to her burgeoning career. Despite this professional loss, she tried to continue leading a fulfilling life, inasmuch as the surrounding danger allowed. She enjoyed the courtship of her college sweetheart, Khalid, exchanging frequent letters with him and enjoying an occasional visit. He soon proposed to her and in 2006 they celebrated their union with a joyous wedding despite the country's subdued atmosphere. As was the custom, Khalid's family had prepared a room in their house for the couple, and Zeinab anticipated her new life there with her husband. They hoped their wedding would be a new beginning to help overcome the negatives of the war. Instead, they remember it as a disastrous turning point. That year saw a dramatic escalation in violence after militia attacks destroyed the Hassan al-Askari Mosque in Samara, a holy site to Shiite Muslims. The mosque's destruction initiated a sectarian rift in the country, dividing Sunni from Shia and sowing violence between them. Various militias were battling the American military and among themselves for control of the country, and, with the mosque's

destruction, religious affiliation became implicated in that struggle. Iraqis throughout the country felt the growing tension. The threat became personal when members of an unknown militia murdered Zeinab's new father-in-law just one week after the wedding. He had been affiliated with the Sunni-dominated Ba'ath Party and was thus a threat to the new actors vying for political and religious control. By extension, his family members were also targets of the violence. The newlyweds feared for their lives and fled for neighboring Syria a few days later, the smell of new furniture still permeating their unused room in the house of Zeinab's late father-in-law. The personal and professional losses of her job, community, and newly established place in society would haunt Zeinab as a defining feature of the aftermath as she moved away from Iraq to California.

Mustafa, too, tried to hold on to the life he had secured for himself in Iraq, which included his well-established engineering career, his children's future prospects, his physical possessions and his position as a respected member of his community in Baghdad. "We [Iraqis] think at that time we can build Iraq again.... We decide to try to take contracts, to take control. This is our country. United States of America came to here, but they cannot know how to do [*sic*], 'cause it's different culture." After the war's beginning, Mustafa secured a job with the American military as a contracted engineer. He resented the military presence in his country, but that work allowed him to help rebuild his city, generate income to support his family, and continue his career. Unfortunately, despite his earnest efforts to stay, by 2006 he and his family were confronted by unavoidable violence that forced them to leave. Mustafa described how unknown terrorists simultaneously attacked him at his workplace and threatened his family at home. The violence could have been spurred by many factors, whether his apparent cooperation with Americans, his former status as a successful professional during the reign of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party, or any number of random motives decided by the terrorists. Mustafa survived physically unscathed, but narrowly escaping an attempt on his life and then finding his wife and his mother huddled in fright under a table at home with his child wailing in their arms broke his resolve to stay in Iraq. Regardless of the professional and personal sacrifices required, Mustafa could not endure any further death threats. Like Zeinab, with little choice besides leaving or dying, Mustafa packed up his family and the few belongings they could carry. He said goodbye to his friends, his home, and the engineering company he had built from the ground up, and they escaped to Syria.

Others were confronted by more frightening danger, including two of Huda's Iraqi coworkers, who were kidnapped for working with an American company. Huda explained that towards the end of her employment with the organization, "the manager of the program got kidnapped and his family paid \$100,000 [ransom]. And the other one got kidnapped and tortured. But thank god they're both alive. But we lose— (*begins to sob suddenly*). I'm sorry." The destruction of the Hasan al-Askari Mosque and the

increase in violence impacted a third coworker, who was a victim of the sectarian conflict. Huda told me the story in short bursts, crying throughout.

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

She took a deep breath and then briskly continued with the interview. “Yes. It was hard. I'm sorry. I get so emotional when I remember those stuff.” The danger increased daily. Although she had fought hard to restore her city to a functional and safe level, the constant death threats gave her no choice but to leave it all behind. Having worked for the American government for at least one consecutive year between 2003 and 2009, she was eligible for direct resettlement to the United States through a Special Immigration Visa (SIV).²⁰ With that visa in hand, she and her children would move to California to rebuild their lives, but the loss of nearly everything familiar and cherished would be a defining and devastating feature of that aftermath for her.

Most of the other refugees in this study joined the estimated two and a half million Iraqi refugees who had fled via car or airplane to neighboring Jordan and Syria by 2009. Prospects were bleak because refugees legally prohibited from working but living expenses were high. Most in this study relied on their life savings and whatever jobs they could find that were less visible to the government. It was their relative wealth as former members of the professional class that allowed them to survive while they waited for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to issue them a visa to another country. When their requests were approved, few in this study were prepared for the news that their only option for resettlement was the United States, the very country whose war led to their forced departure from Iraq. Most in this study knew very little about the U.S. and even less about Americans. Mustafa cited Hollywood films as his main source of knowledge about the country and its people before 2003. “We just saw what we saw on movies. Texas, movies, guns. Yeah. Arnold. Action movies, action movies!... We didn't know anything about their lives, the American lives, daily lives.” As of 2003, all had at least seen Americans in the form of the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Mustafa's opinion was fairly negative because of Bashar's death and the military's connection to his professional and personal losses.

I have a bad impression, you know, because the first day they killed my brother-in-law. And after that, when we saw them on the street, they don't know anything about us.... There is no communication. It is very hard.

²⁰ “Special Immigrant Visas for Iraqis Who Worked for/on Behalf of the U.S. Government.” U.S. Department of State, USA.gov. n.d. Web. Accessed 13 Feb. 2011.

Even, we can talk, but we cannot trust each other. He cannot trust me and I cannot trust him.

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

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

Rather than risk forced return to Iraq where more death and destruction awaited, Mustafa and the others accepted with trepidation the American visa and the unknown future that awaited.

BEGINNING ANEW

The majority of Iraqis in this study moved to northern California between 2009 and 2010, and it was upon their arrival that the personal, professional and status-based loss of the last decade fully manifested. All were initially hosted by refugee friends or distant relatives who had helped sponsor their move, as required by the U.S. government. In cramped quarters they acknowledged the loss of their private space, wondered where to begin searching for a job, and accepted that they were foreigners without title or significant status in the busy city outside. Despite their professional capacity, most Iraqis in this study have struggled to find jobs. The American government offered services to help with their physical resettlement, such as transitional housing for the first few months and a small stipend, but there were no programs to help them resume their professional careers. At the same time, the economy was also unstable and the market uncharacteristically flooded with unemployed Californians, leaving few of the entry-level jobs that could have normally been available for refugees.

Mustafa arrived in California eager to resume his career as an engineer, but the state resettlement agency instructed him to first apply for welfare. He was shocked. "I didn't want welfare. I wanted to work." With the high rate of unemployment in the general population and no specialized programs to support his professional transition, welfare was his most reasonable means of immediate financial security. Mustafa had no alternative, so he volunteered in various office jobs to earn the government aid, but he also began his own search for a way to return to his career. "I start to apply for civil engineering, and then I [learned] you have to get the license, you have to have passport. Then, like, foreman. And then I applied for clerk. And then I applied for technician. Nothing. For cashier, nothing whatsoever. Nothing. Oh my god!" Despite having a degree and more than a decade of experience running his own engineering company, he needed to be certified according to American engineering standards before a company

would consider him. He immediately set about studying for the recertification exam, motivated by his overwhelming desire to return to the career he left behind in Iraq.

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

He has been more successful in regaining some of his social status by helping others in the Iraqi community and providing them counsel and leadership for everything from planning holiday celebrations to filing their taxes. Once again, Mustafa is a respected figure in his community, even if the larger society perhaps reduces him to his job title. He and Noor are reestablishing their home, finding new friends, collecting meaningful belongings, and securing the futures of their children, who are effectively navigating the new school system. Like the rest of the Iraqi refugees, their priority had been to move to safety and regain their children’s future prospects, and in that they succeeded. Within a few years, Mustafa and his family will likely become U.S. citizens, as will most of the other refugees in this study, which could be beneficial in terms of lower university tuition for the children and ease of travel abroad. Still, Mustafa is disheartened by how much he lost. His gains, though significant in the context of the war, pale in comparison with what he had before. As he said to me once, “This wasn’t my dream. I didn’t ask for this— any of this.”

For Zeinab, the aftermath is defined by a combination of professional and personal losses. She left behind her family members and her neighborhood. She was also just beginning a life in a new home, with Khalid, and the loss of their room and belongings in that house was poignant for her. She wistfully recounted to me the matching set of a mirror and bed frame that she had wanted for years, and which she

had received as a wedding present, only to abandon it along with most of her other belongings when she and Khalid fled the country. A cherished picture of that room with its matching furniture set was in her wedding photo album, along with pictures of the friends and family that they left behind. Zeinab pointed out to me which of her loved ones had been killed, which had scattered as refugees around the world, and which still braved the danger in Iraq. Zeinab feels her personal loss each day that she spends in California, so far from her family and from the home that she and her husband had just barely begun to make their own.

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

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

For Huda, the most defining feature of the aftermath is her personal loss. She reminisces about daily visits with her extended family in Baghdad, her beautiful home and garden, her beloved city, and the total sense of security and belonging that she felt there before 2003. Huda is grateful that her life in California is improved from the insecurities of living in the war-torn Iraq, and that her children are once again able to attend respected schools, but she is haunted by the loss of those salient components of her

personal life that she fought so hard to keep. Since moving to California she no longer felt safe outside her home after dark, she hardly had space in the concrete patio of her rented apartment for a few potted plants, and she constantly missed the supportive presence of her mother and siblings, who had to stay in Baghdad.

Karwan, Nadia and Nabil were exceptions in this study. These were the few refugees I met who were dissatisfied with their prospects in Iraq. Since their arrival in California, they have been attending community college and kindling ambitions for new careers, unencumbered by the limitations of the Ba'ath bureaucracy. They enjoy various other freedoms denied them in Iraq, like discussing politics without restrictions, traveling freely, and becoming acquainted with the world outside their native country. For them, their losses were not the deciding characteristic of the aftermath. Rather, their gains surpass the losses they suffered from the war, and they are pleased with their new direction in life. For the rest of the group, however, and for the majority of Iraqi refugees I met who were displaced by the war, the aftermath was overwhelmingly characterized by loss.

OF LOSS AND GAIN

Within the space of less than ten years the daily realities for these refugees transformed from a predictable stability under the Iraqi dictator to deadly chaos in his absence and finally to a quiet but as yet unsettled freedom in a country across the world. They left behind their homes, their professions, and many of their family members. Most of the refugees in this study lost their standing as respected professionals. Many also lost the physical foundations and personal connections that defined their lives before the war. Some realized drastic loss that was somewhat tempered, though not erased, by opportunities for professional and personal redevelopment. All saw certain gains, including eligibility for American citizenship based on their refugee-status, but it was only a select few who determined that their prospects in California outweighed the damages of the war. Their cumulative loss in matters of profession, personal life, and societal status is one component within the larger framework of the aftermath presented in this paper. I will revisit that change and further examine the remaining components of the aftermath in Chapter Three. First, I turn to the similarly drastic but nearly opposite change that the American veterans of this study encountered in connection with the war.

We were standing in our garage and American troops comes, and starts talking to us... [They] said this is our own business. We should deal with it, not them.

-Huda, an Iraqi refugee

CHAPTER 2.

AMERICAN VETERANS: FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM

One and a half million Americans deployed to Iraq between 2003 and 2011 to participate in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Of the American veterans that had enlisted and served in either Iraq or Afghanistan, the PEW Research center gauges that 94% were high school graduates, with less than five percent holding a college degree.²¹ An estimated nine out of ten were from households earning \$60 thousand or below.²² In recognition of veterans honorably discharged from serving the country, the American government offers to cover their educational expenses through the provisions of the GI Bill. All of the veterans in this study were university students or recent graduates at the time of interview, but few imagined they could attend a prestigious academic institution when they enlisted in the military. This chapter charts their journey through the military and into higher education, illustrating that a defining

²¹ Taylor, Paul, Rich Morin, et al. (eds.). "The Military-Civilian Gap. War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era." PEW Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends. 2011:85. Web.

²² These estimates were calculated based on the zip codes of enlisted soldiers between 2003 and 2005 via the U.S. Department of Defense and information in the U.S. Census on those estimated regional incomes. Kane, Tim. "Who are the Recruits? The Demographic Characteristics of U.S. Military Enlistment, 2003-2005." Washington, D.C.: Heritage Center for Data Analysis. 2006:3. Web.

feature of the aftermath for these veterans was a dramatic gain. Similar to the loss of the Iraqi refugees, this gain can be categorized as personal, professional, and status-based. The veterans' personal gain reflects a development of critical thinking, self-awareness, and an informed perspective of Iraqis, Arabs and Muslims. The professional gain includes access to a university degree and respected jobs based on that academic capital, most of which was inaccessible to them before they enlisted. Lastly, the status gain relates to their having honorably completed their military service and the resultant socioeconomic benefits associated with their new positions as respected veterans. I analyze this cumulative gain by examining the academic opportunities available to them before and after their military service, their experiences during the war, and their responses to the new avenues for professional and personal development.

ENLISTING

Although the GI Bill would be important to all of the veterans in this study after they left the military, the primary reason most enlisted had little to do with obtaining funding for their education. Some anticipated fulfilling their service to their country, but many joined in order to pursue opportunities for personal growth and what many called "adventure." The majority was uninformed about the War on Terror and simply hoped for bigger opportunities than what they could find or afford prior to enlisting.

One veteran, named Andy, was born in the early 1980s and grew up working on a ranch that his family had cultivated for generations. He enjoyed the fruit canning, wood chopping, and outdoor exploration that defined his childhood, but as a teenager the remote property left him feeling trapped and overly dependent on his parents. As was the case for many of the veteran participants, by the end of high school he was eager to move out of his little town, but attending a university did not seem like a realistic option.

I mean I thought about it but I didn't have very good grades, and that was partly from an apathy about school— a lack of motivation, and partly because I worked a lot [in a restaurant].... It's not like I didn't learn and wasn't intellectually capable, I think, but it didn't look that way on paper and I certainly wasn't, in terms of my maturity, ready for school.

Andy considered working a job while attending a local community college but he felt strongly about expanding his horizons and moving away. The military appealed to him as a respectable, feasible alternative.

It was September of my senior year of high school when September 11th happened. Yeah, and I had already talked to the... recruiters and was thinking about joining the military, and so then I was all signed up and at 18 left for boot camp.... I was just ready to be somewhere else and to you know have a new experience and have a new adventure.

His military service would fulfill his desire for adventure and take him to a new realm of discipline and knowledge. In addition to undergoing basic military training, Andy took military courses in Arabic for several years prior to deployment in order to prepare for working in intelligence. He quickly mastered the language and would meet the challenge of his duties in Iraq, but he would find himself unequipped for the psychological repercussions during the war and after.

Other veterans came from families with a history of military service that instilled respect and envy for that lifestyle at an early age. John's father was a commissioned officer, so he grew up living in communities of military families on bases around the U.S.

There on the base... it's a small place so you see people marching around outside.... You'd hear every music that goes off,... they'll go marching along on their parade deck and having formations. One of the first days walking from the house towards school, first weeks we were there, and the band playing, music playing. Kind of a good feeling, walking out your door all upbeat and everything.... I always had, like, this enthusiasm, this desire to be [in the military], and I dunno, I feel like I was kind of bred for it.

John hoped to become an officer like his father, and after two semesters in community college, he enlisted in the military.

Another veteran, Christina, also attended a few semesters of community college before enlisting. She had no plans to join the military until a recruiter offered her immediate employment and training in her field of interest in late 2001. "I was kind of out of money for school and living at home with my folks and not really into that, and I wanted to just move on, see things and do things." Christina explained that "it wasn't like a rush of patriotism," but the opportunity to gain paid experience in her field was unrivaled at the time. She also anticipated the practical financial support she would later glean from the GI Bill. So, she said, "I signed up." Two years later, she would arrive in the warzone to begin her field work.

Most veterans described having very little knowledge of Iraq or its people before deployment. Sean tried to learn what he could of the place from newspaper pictures.

I didn't even know if there'd be electricity, I didn't know where we were gonna be, I didn't know anything.... I remember looking at newspapers with pictures of Iraq and stuff and it was showing guys in you know flip-flops and T-shirts and stuff, and I was like, 'Oh, they're wearing T-shirts and jeans, just like I wear T-shirts and jeans. I didn't know that!' I had no idea—especially growing up in... the Midwest, middle of nowhere. I'd never even heard anybody speak Spanish until I came to California, you know what I mean?

His sheltered life in the Midwest was what encouraged him to enlist because, as he said, "I could either drink myself to death in a steel mill or join the [military]." He also described how he entered the military with a desire to fight but, as he later realized, a limited grasp of the consequences.

There's definitely a side of me that's very testosterone-driven and violent and, yeah, right, I like to blow stuff up, cool! I mean who doesn't want to go blow something up? But, and I think that's part of man's nature, is that, somewhere, we're just aggressive, destructive people. You know what I mean? Um, and a large part of the reason I joined the [military] is, I just— I wanted to fight. I literally just wanted to fight.

During his first tour in Iraq, Sean would begin to account for the significance of his actions. Later, this understanding would evolve into a critical analysis of his military service and what he would call a “lack of foresight.” First, however, he would deploy to Iraq as a dedicated OIF soldier.

Harold, a first generation American who enlisted in late 2000, did not even consider war as a possibility, let alone a war in Iraq. Like Andy and Christina, he wanted to escape his hometown but had neither the GPA nor the motivation to fulfill that wish by attending college. Instead, three days after his high school graduation he joined the military.

I wanted to get the hell out of there. And this was before the war, nobody expected anything. I figure okay I'm just go ahead and join, travel the world, do my thing, do my four years, hopefully get some discipline within me and then I can go back to school and you know, go from there— when I appreciate, later. And you know it didn't pan out that way.

In January of 2003, after two years of service within the U.S., Harold was abruptly pulled from his job and informed that he and his unit were leaving for Iraq. Three days later and still in shock from the unexpected news, he deployed to participate in the initial invasion.

“OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM”

Most veterans in this study first deployed in 2004, with the last deploying in 2008, and all would serve at least one tour. Many had learned a few basic commands in Arabic, a few trained abroad at an American base in Okinawa, Japan, and some traveled to Kuwait before entering Iraq. These young Americans were aged 18 to 21 when they first confronted the harsh realities of war in a foreign country, amid a population of Iraqis struggling to continue their daily lives. Most of the veterans at first knew very little about the Iraqi people around them, but they assumed substantial responsibilities that contributed to determining the country's future, from overthrowing the government, fighting insurgents,²³ facilitating the

²³ The term “insurgents” is used in this chapter as expressed by veterans in this study to identify Iraqi and foreign combatants that fought against the American, British, and European troops in Iraq and, at times, against the Iraqi population itself.

country's first elections, and attempting to rebuild the nation. These would be formative experiences for the veterans.

Harold, having served in the military for two years, was in charge of several soldiers below him in rank. This meant that he was accountable for their safety and their lives. At 21 years of age and with no experience in a warzone, he was nervous about his competence.

Try having you know, the weight of knowing that other people's lives depended on you. And then on top of that, like knowing that you might not come back home. It's a very, very big weight.... If I don't do my job it's gonna cost somebody else's life, and that like I said, that feeling right there was pretty overwhelming at first. But afterwards, you know, you start to begin to adapt and take on— take responsibility.

His unit waited in Kuwait for nearly two months before crossing the border into Iraq. Harold spent that time gathering information from those with more experience, drilling himself and building trust with his fellow soldiers. He also learned as much Iraqi Arabic as he could in that short time, storing useful words on flashcards that he would frequently reference during the war. His basic proficiency would help him communicate commands more effectively and connect him to the situation more directly than some of the veterans who did not speak any Arabic. Once in Iraq, his unit's task was simple.

Don't get killed. Go up there and take over the regime. That's pretty much it. Take. Over. The regime.... We came up through the southern portion, [in] trucks and then dismounted every time we came up through something. And we did a lot of walking, patrolling up and down the roads. Checking for booby traps, going through towns, clearing them out— things of that sort, until we got to Baghdad.

He assisted with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government before returning to the U.S. and would volunteer for several subsequent deployments.

A year later, in March of 2004, a veteran named Weston arrived close to Baghdad at an old Iraqi airbase that was under American control. He described his first impressions wandering through the new living quarters.

It was just like, it was kind of bizarre. It's like, you're walking around from these old barracks that have like paintings... done by Iraqi soldiers. It was just kind of surreal, I dunno. And at the time it was pretty cold cuz it was kind of winter then still, which I don't think any of us really expected and you're not really prepared for it.

Like most in this study, Weston arrived with little knowledge of the place or people around him. Unlike most, after only a few months he became critical of his unit's demeaning attitude towards the Iraqi people. His change of perspective was incited in part by a fellow soldier pointing out to him that although

“*hajis*” was a common term in their unit for Iraqis, it was being used as a racist pejorative.²⁴ Weston agreed with his friend’s conclusions and removed the word from his lexicon. This marked his first questioning of his decisions to enlist in the military, which had originally promised adventure and prestige. This also sowed his doubts about the validity of the larger mission in Iraq.

Around the same time, Sean arrived in nearby Najaf, where insurgents were attacking an Iraqi police station. City officials requested American military support to defend the Iraqi police officers and Sean was sent to help protect them. When the insurgents attacked again, the Americans returned fire and a chase ensued through a nearby cemetery connected to a mosque.

That was like a month of non-stop fighting.... It finally ended with– we surrounded the Imam Ali mosque.... They pulled back into the mosque and American troops– you don’t want us clearing a mosque cuz we’ll destroy it. But at the same time, trying to figure out how to end the situation [...because] they’d been doing all kinds– you know, they were like beheading police officers and their families, they were like murdering... Iraqi families.... And throughout the fighting they killed like 11 of our guys.

The opposition brokered a peace deal in which they were allowed to walk out of mosque through a crowd of civilians, so that the American military could not identify and attack any of those involved. After such an intensive month of fighting, Sean was disappointed by the outcome. “We had to block the streets off and let everybody leave and not do anything, watch all these guys who were shooting at you the day before, two days before, pour out of the mosque.” In contrast with his animosity towards the insurgents, Sean was interested in connecting with many of the Iraqis he met under more peaceful conditions. He accepted the hug of an Iraqi man who voted for the first time, delivered school supplies from Americans to children and families in the villages, and shared meals with members of the Iraqi military. “The Iraqi army would invite me over personally to have tea and supper with them.... They’d bring me *kabobs* and stuff, and they’d sit and have *chai* tea with me, etcetera.... And definitely with my doing as much as possible to return their kindness, I had a really good relationship with all of them.” His open-mindedness to meeting Iraqi people would later help him as he developed a deeper level of critical thinking, but it would also magnify some of the traumas he endured.

Many of the combatants that escaped from Sean’s battle in Najaf moved to Fallujah, where a second battle ensued. Another veteran, Brent, participated in the conflict there during his deployment. The American military gave everyone in the city notice that they had to leave because the city was being cleared of insurgents and anyone still there was considered a member of the opposition. Brent was

²⁴ The word “*haji*” or “*hadji*” derives from the Arabic “*al-ḥajjī*,” an honorific title for someone who has completed “*al-ḥajj*” (the pilgrimage to Mecca), or for an elder who is accorded great respect, but some American military personnel use it as a derogatory term for Iraqis, Arabs, Muslims, or people of Middle Eastern origin.

responsible for guarding those who were captured, known to him and commonly by the military as EPW's, or "Enemy Prisoners of War." Although some prisoners were simply citizens who were unwilling or unable to leave their homes, they were all treated the same. One was an elderly Iraqi man whom Brent estimated to be 70 or 80 years old. The man was feeble but still could have pulled the trigger of a gun, so Brent was required to keep him in handcuffs. As the sun set, the man began to gesture and to speak in Arabic. Brent described his own confusion:

[The old man] was like begging us for something. So you know, finally we get a Serbian guy over to like translate for us. I mean we didn't speak any Arabic.... So like the translator said he wanted to go to the bathroom or something to wash his face and stuff so he could pray, so I took him over there.... And I mean, I was raised Catholic so I recognized the prostration and stuff, but it seemed a lot deeper than that. And I realized, I'd absolutely no idea what was going on. But it was obvious he wasn't an insurgent.

Brent was uncomfortable that he knew so little about this man's religion and language. He knew it was a useful military tactic because it was easier to shoot when "the enemy" was unknown, but his discomfort stayed with him throughout the war. It would later inform his decisions in college, prompting him to learn Arabic and study the history and cultures of the Middle East.

A third-generation soldier named Greg, who reported to basic training ten days after his high school graduation, first arrived in Iraq around the same time as Brent. Greg related the overwhelming nature of his first deployment, attributing his difficulties to a lack of understanding.

I was 19 when I went first, so I really had no like, nothing remotely close to a well-rounded concept of what was going on.... The cultural aspect of it, the greater political problems, and even the wider strategic questions— you don't really, you don't think about because you're 18, 19, 20.

He survived that first tour by following orders without question. On his second deployment he worked in the field to anticipate the oppositions' moves, so was required to be better informed. He learned some Iraqi Arabic and also employed Iraqi translators to eavesdrop on sermons in mosques so that his team could outsmart their opponents.

The insurgency started getting more complex.... So we started... more things like small-kill teams. Doing things like listening posts outside of mosques for *jumu'ah* prayers [Friday afternoon prayer] just to, you know, see if anybody's gonna show up with guns... or to actually listen to what they're going to preach... maybe get an idea of what's going on.... It got much more intense.

With increased responsibilities, Greg was required to have better awareness of his surroundings and the context of the war. Despite the developments in the conflict and the greater difficulty of his tasks, he better understood his mission so the deployment progressed more comfortably than his first. Later, as a university student, he would reflect on the complicated and convoluted nature of the war in which he

participated, saying that the larger mechanics and reasons behind the war still eluded him. He would gain some insight via the theories of war and histories of colonialism in his political science classes, but he did not think anyone could fully understand what happened in the Iraq war.

Another veteran, Jeremy, was involved in addressing the basic needs of Iraqi civilians in 2004. He helped direct projects for reconstructing medical facilities and fixing generators, and might have worked alongside Huda or other like her. Of all the veterans in this study, Jeremy was the most knowledgeable about the personal lives of the people he encountered. He recalled the names and stories of three of the Iraqi translators who worked with him, including details like their motivations for seeking employment with the military, as well as more personal observations of their lives, like their degree of religious observation. One, named Hibba, sought employment with the military in order to improve her chances of an SIV or other visa out of the warzone.

[Hibba] had a young kid; she was working with the U.S., trying to get— somehow, enhance her eligibility to get a visa to leave the country, you know, that kind of thing. Well, her story has a couple of twists.... She ended up getting a visa for Canada, but before she could go she was killed. Um, so— they [insurgents] actually basically assassinated her. They came up on both sides of her car and shot in, like on her way to work— on her way to like work with us. And then, after she was gone, that's when we hired Sana.

Jeremy's awareness of the Iraqis with whom he worked surpassed his job requirements and indicated a level of his own interest. Unlike Brent, Jeremy would chose a major in college that was distinctly removed from the Middle East, but he would also maintain interest in deploying to Afghanistan after graduation.

Andy, who had grown up on the ranch, arrived in Iraq in 2005 after several years of intensive Arabic language training. He was rather inspired by the language and sensitive to the related Arab culture, but that refinement was discordant with the military's purpose for his training. He spent most of the deployment inside an office, participating in electronic warfare by translating intercepted calls and conversations that might help defeat the insurgency. Andy was expected to inhabit the speakers' minds and discern their intentions, but in that role and with his existing appreciation for the Arabic language, he was unable to dehumanize the people conversing in his headphones. His intensive work and the lack of distance from the "enemy" was psychologically taxing at the time, and it would impede his academic aspirations and daily life as a civilian.

While many of these veterans later reflected on the complicated nature of fulfilling duties that sometimes conflicted with their moral inclinations, a veteran named Tony responded to that dilemma while he was still in Iraq. Tony was one of the last veterans in this study to leave Iraq and was stationed as a security guard at a remote base. There, he examined vehicles traveling past the base, searching for hidden explosives that insurgents might be moving towards Baghdad. His orders were to shoot on sight if

anyone seemed hostile by approaching too close to the base without slowing down or otherwise violating the base's safety protocol. Tony described having what he called "a few... hairy situations" in which he had to kill people who he suspected were innocent civilians that seemed lost but who were driving too close to the area he was protecting. Distressed and unnerved by those episodes, he resolved to implement a warning plan to deter such unwitting trespassers. After waiting 15 agonizing weeks for clearance from his superiors, Tony and his fellow soldiers set up a creative system of his design: it was what he called a "football field" of warning lights, loudspeaker messages in Arabic, and signs with the universal symbols of death in order to discourage harmless civilians and half-hearted insurgents from approaching the "red zone." He armed fellow security guards with simple flashcards of transliterated Arabic commands that could help deter people who accidentally approached the base, and the scheme was largely successful. Tony's critical thinking and determined creativity saved many lives, which would not only serve the Iraqis but also, later, his own psychological wellbeing.

REFLECTIONS

The majority of veterans in this study returned to the U.S. between 2005 and 2008, and most were discharged by 2009, after eight years in the military and an average of two deployments to Iraq. All relocated to California within a few years of leaving the military, adding their numbers to the 143,000 OIF and OEF veterans in the state.²⁵ Some returned to live with their parents, others moved to be with a spouse or partner, and some chose to stay after traveling through the area. The transition to civilian life was difficult for all of them, not least because of the shock of switching from the structured, controlled environment of the military to unfettered freedom. The PEW Research Center found that more than 30% of post-9/11 combat veterans reported having difficulty readjusting to their civilian lives, with a majority suffering from "frequent incidents of irritability or anger..., strains in family relations..., and feelings of despondence and hopelessness."²⁶ Harold explained that returning from a combat zone and then leaving the military was like "driving at a hundred miles per hour, and then all of the sudden hitting a brick wall. Sometimes, you know, I've had my issues where, it's been very difficult to— transition. I still go through those difficulties right now.... It's very, very hard." With emotional support from family and friends, the

²⁵ According to the 2011 U.S. Census, as cited by "Iraq by the Numbers." Democratic Policy and Communications Center. 19 Dec. 2011. Web.

²⁶ Taylor, Paul, Rich Morin, et al. (eds.). "The Military-Civilian Gap. War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era." PEW Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends. 2011:52-53. Web.

financial aid of the GI Bill²⁷ and the force of their own determination, all of the veterans in this study enrolled in community college and then earned admission to universities with competitive admission rates and highly reputable programs. Many chose to major in political science, a few studied Arabic and learned about the Middle East, and others pursued fields with no direct associations with the war, like European history or physics. It was upon beginning their university studies that they encountered the most dramatic gains associated with their military service, even as they struggled with some of its negative repercussions.

Sean was unsure of his academic potential when he was discharged, but his veteran friends encouraged him to enroll in community college. To his amazement, he successfully transferred to the four-year university and continued to flourish academically. “I still wake up every morning surprised that I’m going to [this university]. How did *I* get [*here*]?!” The support of his friends was vital and, he added, “if it wasn’t for the GI Bill I wouldn’t be here.” That professional gain was a significant feature of the aftermath and a dramatic gain for him, having grown up with the prospect of a low-profile future in a steel mill. His professional opportunity also led to an important personal gain. Attending a university with classes on a diverse range of international topics inspired him to study about Islam and the Middle East, and Sean was dismayed to realize how little he had known of the local culture while in Iraq. He chose to write a paper about the mosque and cemetery in Najaf where he first fought and which, he learned, “is like the third holiest [site] in like all of Shia Islam.” Through the course lectures and his own research, he recognized the gravity of his lack of historical and cultural knowledge while he was in Iraq. “I didn’t even know the significance of the cemetery, or the Imam Ali Mosque, or anything like that. You figure somebody would come in and be like, ‘Hey guys, this is a holy site, etcetera, maybe we can find a way to work this out.’ The lack of understanding is remarkable.” His realizations have prompted him to speculate about developing an organization to educate soldiers about the social and cultural norms of their destination prior to deployment.

We need to make people [Americans] more culturally aware, know what’s going on, instead of just sending everybody to go, ‘Oh, hey, go destroy this stuff.’ Literally. No lie. The majority of the problems that we ran into we

²⁷ The GI Bill that applied to veterans in this study was the “Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act” or the “21st Century GI Bill,” which took effect in August 2009. The Bill provides benefits for the educational expenses of veterans that served on active duty after September 11, 2001, and who served for a total of at least 36 months. In California, the Bill covers the cost of college attendance up to the tuition of the state’s most expensive public institution for eight full-time semesters. In addition to providing for tuition and fees, it also provides additional support for the cost of books and living expenses while the veterans are in college. Many in this study calculated the most strategic application of their benefits, such as enrolling part-time or enrolling in more units per semester, so the Bill would cover 4-6 years of their undergraduate education at community college and their university. “The 21st Century GI Bill: What it means for California.” *Commission Report 08-12*. California Postsecondary Education Commission. 2008. Web.

probably created ourselves. I mean the infrastructures that we were fixing is stuff that we destroyed.... It's a mess.

He believes that such knowledge could help mitigate some of the confusion and tension that he encountered as he fought his way through the cemetery in Najaf. Although he enlisted in the military with a strong desire to fight, his deployment to Iraq and the college courses helped him develop critical thinking that brought him to question the war and his participation in it. That personal gain, in turn, has affected how he approaches the professional opportunities that he earned.

As he nears graduation, Sean has encountered many opportunities for respected jobs with high-profile companies that are reaching out to him and his veteran peers. With the leadership skills and maturity he gained from his military service and the respected status of his forthcoming degree, Sean is a promising candidate. The VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 further encourages veteran employment by increasing tax breaks for businesses that hired veterans before January 1, 2013.²⁸ His employment potential is yet another significant gain from the modest life as a blue-collar worker that he considered prior to the military. However, despite the profitable professional opportunities available to him, Sean's experiences and his personal gain are pointing him towards a more modest path. "I grew up in a lower-middle class family.... I never expected I'd be here, so I don't really care about money or anything like that. I don't want to be a lawyer or make lots of money.... None of that really matters to me. I just wanna go do cool stuff and help people— same basic goals that I've always had, I guess." Reflecting further on the violence and damages he perpetrated during the war, Sean explained that he aspires to a career that will benefit people in developing areas of the world.

Christina, too, earned professional gain and personal growth that bore significant influence on her life in the aftermath. Although she had enlisted for the promise of training in her academic field of interest, her job in Iraq did not meet the standards of what she expected for training in her field. Her work and daily interactions with Iraqis also revealed a level of Islamophobia and other destructive tendencies in the military that made her critical of the military's mission. Nonetheless, she completed several obligatory tours to Iraq. Upon being honorably discharged, she traveled across the United States to help alleviate some of the stresses of the previous eight years. Finding herself in California, she enrolled in community college and then transferred to a competitive university, where she took advantage of the GI Bill's economic support. She, like others, enrolled in classes about the religions and politics of the Middle East to better understand her experiences in the war, and she also studied Arabic. Armed with her arsenal of

²⁸ To improve veterans' transitions to the civilian life and recognize their service, the U.S. government expanded the Work Opportunity Tax Credit available to employers that hired veterans before January 1, 2013. "Expanded Work Opportunity Tax Credit Available for Hiring Qualified Veterans." Internal Revenue Service (IRS). 4 Aug. 2012. Web.

knowledge about Arabs, Muslims and the expansive Middle East, Christina has become quite articulate on the subject of Islamophobia. She actively protested against the war, campaigning against religious racism and advocating for improved psychological support for soldiers and veterans. More recently, she is developing avenues to connect with Iraqi refugees in the United States and she plans to return to Iraq on a peaceful mission of goodwill and friendship. Although she was dissatisfied with her military service, Christina said that she “doesn’t regret anything,” because the cumulative experiences brought her to where she is today. The combination of her professional and personal gains in the war’s aftermath have shaped her identity and will continue to inform her actions even as she distances herself from the military. Christina’s sentiment was echoed by all of the veterans in the study, expressing that they grew immensely in light of the challenges and opportunities associated with their deployments even if they disagreed with the war.

John, having grown up in a military family, fulfilled the path he had always hoped to take by enlisting. Although he did not achieve the position of a commissioned officer, he gained the status of being a veteran like his father and grandfather. He described that his deployments to Iraq were at once satisfying and thrilling because he saw his main mission as having helped Iraqis. Of a humanitarian mission to help Iraqis displaced by the violence, he reflected that “it’s pretty incredible, just what all we were able to accomplish.” Even so, he had some disturbing thoughts about the war itself and some of his actions while he was there. At a certain point, he said, “I didn’t really agree with the objective or goal, because I really didn’t know what it was at that time anymore.” However, “even with that moral conflict, it didn’t get in the way of my duty, because I knew that there were other people relying on me, and family relying on me to come back safely, and other families relying on me to bring their loved ones back safely.” Upon returning to his civilian life, John pursued a degree in engineering. His primary concerns in choosing his degree were practical, namely that he would be able to support his wife and their future children, but his choice also reflected his desire to mobilize the degree in a positive direction, in order that might balance some of the destruction in which he participated.

Andy initially gained professionally by enlisting in the military because it earned him a ticket out of his small town and provided him the challenge of learning Arabic, but he would suffer a larger personal loss in consequence. He entered the university within months of being discharged and studied Arabic, continuing with the skills he had acquired in the military. As the semester progressed and he once more drew deep into the Arabic language, the full brunt of the traumas and emotional distress from his tour in Iraq surfaced. Unlike his comrades in Iraq, Andy had never had a hope of distancing himself from “the enemy” and instead held their voices and stories inside his mind. Immersing himself in Arabic at the university triggered memories of the warzone and of the personal dilemma he had endured by betraying the very people that he had trained to understand. As a result of these tensions, he withdrew from the

university and enrolled in community college to reconsider his course of study and begin to process the traumatic effects of the war. After a few years, he returned to the university to pursue a degree that was more distanced from the subject of the war. Andy found new interest in his studies, but he was disappointed that he had lost access to a language that had been delightful and enjoyable before the war. As was the case for many of the veterans, the emotional conflict he endured during the war also augured badly for his psychological welfare in the aftermath, which will be examined in the following chapter.

OF GAIN AND LOSS

The path that these veterans have taken— enlisting in the military, deploying to the warzone, and returning to civilian life— represents a complex process for each individual. In the aftermath of the war, they realized significant personal, professional, and status-based gains. Many described that attending a competitive university was financially and academically inaccessible prior to their military service. Furthermore, their status gain as veterans opened many doors opened to help them transition into stable, high-level jobs after graduation. Some hope to use those opportunities while others choose their own paths. Of the three types of gain, the influence of their personal growth through critical thinking and expanded knowledge of the Middle East was the most pronounced. Quite a few of the veterans are channeling their new skills and understanding into positive social justice work to help alleviate some of the war's damage. Although their military service resulted in significant gains, some of the veterans also experienced personal losses. Alongside the dramatic change in opportunities, the veterans of this study also experienced two other situations that defined the aftermath for them and which they also shared with the refugees. I turn now to a combined analysis of both groups and those remaining features of the aftermath.

My experience here, some people, they didn't know maybe that America involved in a war with Iraq.

–Samir, an Iraqi refugee

My goal for this action is making sure people are aware that even though the Iraq war is over, it's not over.

–Christina, an American veteran

CHAPTER 3.

A SHARED AFTERMATH

On December 14, 2011, President Obama concluded military operations in Iraq and commanded the last of the American troops to withdraw, ending the war nearly nine years after President Bush declared its beginning in March of 2003. The alleged “weapons of mass destruction” used to justify the war were never found. Even as combat operations finally came to a halt, the war instigated changes that continue to affect both groups in this study. As illustrated in the previous two chapters, the war reduced the refugees’ possibilities for professional, personal and socioeconomic growth, whereas it had the opposite effect of increasing the veterans’ parallel opportunities. Most of the Iraqis in this study switched from having useful university degrees and high-paying, professional careers before the war to being unemployed or working as entry-level staff in California. In contrast, most of the veterans transitioned from a situation wherein their prospects amounted to little more than community college and a blue-collar job, to then being enrolled at a prestigious university with a plethora of possible careers. For a few of the

Iraqis, the war brought desirable changes, while some of the veterans encountered unforeseen losses. The drastic change induced in their personal, professional, and social lives is one of the most important experiences of the aftermath for those in the study. The remaining two experiences that defined the aftermath for each group and which were also shared are the traumatic repercussions of the war and a sense of isolation from the American public.

WAR WOUNDS

The refugees and veterans in this study survived the conflict without obvious physical trauma such as injured limbs or loss of hearing, but all had some degree of psychological and emotional distress. One common medical measure of the continued psychological damages of war is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which the American Psychiatric Association defines as a neurological response to being confronted with an event that seriously threatened the physical integrity of the self or others and that also produced intense feelings of helplessness, fear, or horror. Symptoms include intrusive flashbacks and other recollections of the traumatic event, psychological distress and physiological reactions in response to situations that resemble the event or aspects of it, and feelings of numbness and detachment.²⁹ While all of the participants in my study related having at least some symptoms of PTSD, the focus here is not a strict clinical classification of the disorder, but rather an investigation into the daily ramifications of a spectrum of traumas in the lives of the veterans and refugees, as well as the broader social implications of the injuries inflicted by the war.

With only a handful of studies available about Iraqi refugees in the U.S., there is even less research on their mental health needs. The Encyclopedia of Immigrant Health addresses the subject of trauma among Iraqi refugees in the U.S. with a brief, general statement that “studies have found a high prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental disorders, which is perhaps not surprising given the legacy of war in Iraq.”³⁰ The encyclopedia entry further states that the “psychological response to war, violence and trauma is complex and may be affected by conditions in exile, such as social support, economic opportunity, discrimination, and other factors.” A UNHCR report on a study of Iraqi refugees in Syria in 2008 might shed light on the specific psychological and emotional needs of the refugees in the U.S.

²⁹ “309.81 Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.” *Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*. Washington: American Psychiatric Association. 1994:424-429. Web.

³⁰ Loue, Sana and Martha Sajatovic (eds.). *Encyclopedia of Immigrant Health*. New York: Springer Science and Business Media, LLC. 2012. Web.

The survey showed that depression and anxiety are highly prevalent – 89 percent and 82 respectively. This is linked to terrors endured before they fled Iraq – 77 percent of those interviewed reported being affected by air bombardments and shelling or rocket attacks. 80 percent reported witnessing a shooting. 68 percent said they experienced interrogation or harassment by militias or other groups, including receiving death threats, while 16 percent said they had been tortured. 72 percent were eyewitnesses to a car bombing and 75 percent said they knew someone who had been killed.... UNHCR estimates that one in five of those registered with the agency in Syria since January last year – more than 19,000 individuals – are classified as "victims of torture and/or violence" in Iraq.³¹

The UNHCR concluded that while the study of 800 Iraqi refugees is not a generalization of the nearly 1.5 million Iraqi refugees in Syria, the results “highlight the fact that many of the Iraqi refugees that come to us are suffering from depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.”³² All of the Iraqis in my own study similarly described having witnessed bombings and shootings, having been harassed and threatened by militias and other combatants, or knew of at least one relative or friend who was killed in the war, which indicates that the majority endured severe stress and life-threatening situations. As illustrated in Chapter One, most left Iraq only when their lives and the lives of their family members were repeatedly threatened.

According to a comprehensive study through Georgetown University, the physical and mental health needs of Iraqi refugees in the U.S. are not being met, with many Iraqis waiting months in order to access professional mental health care.³³ Insufficient government funding and refugee limitations such as inadequate English proficiency and lack of transportation exacerbated the issue. I observed similar trends in my own research, but the Iraqis in my study managed to overcome some of the boundaries of health access by enlisting support from other Iraqis or community members with the appropriate skills and resources, such as English fluency, familiarity with the California health system, and a car. The study’s authors concluded that most government programs are focused on meeting the basic needs of housing, transportation and employment, but that “meeting those basic needs will do little good if a refugee’s untreated mental health condition keeps her from making the most of the opportunities provided by resettlement.”³⁴

Veterans in the U.S. face similar levels of trauma and hurdles to obtaining support services. More soldiers than ever before are returning from war with their lives intact, due to advanced technology, life-

³¹ “Trauma Survey in Syria Highlights Suffering of Iraqi Refugees.” Press Release. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 22 Jan. 2008. Web.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Adess, Shani, Dania Ayoubi, Soraya Fata, et al. “Refugee Crisis in America: Iraqis and their Resettlement Experience.” Georgetown University. 2010. Web.

³⁴ Adess, Shani, Dania Ayoubi, Soraya Fata, et al. “Refugee Crisis in America: Iraqis and their Resettlement Experience.” Georgetown University. 2010:32. Web.

saving armor, and better medical resources in the field, but an increased number live with serious injuries and trauma as a result. Of the two million American soldiers that deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, 4,422 died in Iraq³⁵ and 32,226 were wounded there.³⁶ According to research presented at the National Council on Disability in 2009, “an estimated 25-40 percent have less visible wounds— psychological and neurological injuries associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI), which have been dubbed ‘signature injuries’ of the Iraq War.”³⁷ In a study conducted by the PEW Research Center, more than half of post-9/11 combat veterans reported having “experiences that were emotionally traumatic or distressing” during their military service, which translated into difficulties readjusting to their civilian lives.³⁸ Increasing numbers of veterans are also reporting having been sexually abused in the military, a grievance labeled as Military Sexual Trauma (MST). Approximately fourteen percent of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan were women, and of those an estimated 13 to 30 percent had been raped.³⁹ A higher percentage was otherwise sexually traumatized during their service in the military. Across the country, outpatient clinics for the Department of Veteran Affairs have been severely underfunded and understaffed, with only recent increases in funding and more concerted attention paid to the mental health needs of soldiers and veterans. Due to the myriad traumas and the lack of adequate support from health-care providers and society as a whole, an alarming number of veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars survive abroad only to take their own lives at home.⁴⁰ In 2011, the Department of Veteran Affairs estimated that 18 veterans were committing suicide each day.⁴¹ The result is that there were more suicides by veterans each year than the total number of American soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001.

For the veterans and refugees in this study, these and similar repercussions of trauma hindered their pursuit of professional opportunities and interfered with their daily lives. In Andy’s case, traumatic

³⁵ “Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) U.S. Casualty Status * Fatalities.” *American Forces Press Service*. U.S. Department of Defense. 12 Jan. 2012. Web.

³⁶ “Iraq by the Numbers.” Democratic Policy and Communications Center. 19 Dec. 2011. Web.

³⁷ “Invisible Wounds: Serving Service Members and Veterans with PTSD and TBI.” National Council on Disability. Washington, D.C. 2009:1. Web.

³⁸ Taylor, Paul, Rich Morin, et al. (eds.). “The Military-Civilian Gap. War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era.” PEW Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends. 2011:51. Web.

³⁹ Accurate research about the prevalence of rape and other sexual trauma in the military is lacking, in large part because of the associated stigmas and lack of support within the military for addressing sexual trauma. “Invisible Wounds: Serving Service Members and Veterans with PTSD and TBI.” National Council on Disability. Washington, D.C. 2009:51-54. Web. Also, Glantz, Aaron and Iraq Veterans Against the War. *Winter Soldier, Iraq and Afghanistan: Eyewitness Accounts of the Occupations*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008. Print.

⁴⁰ Glantz, Aaron. *The War Comes Home: Washington's Battle Against America's Veterans*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Print.

⁴¹ Parrish, Karen. “Battaglia Calls Reducing Suicides a Top Priority.” *American Forces Press Service*. U.S. Department of Defense. Washington. 12 Dec. 2011. Web.

associations with Arabic and flashbacks to the warzone forced him to suspend his studies at the university, and he was only able to return once he had sorted through some of those “issues.” Sean, who fought through the cemetery in Najaf, related that he suffers from what he called “problems” that often stymie his ability to function at the university and in his personal life. “Sometimes,” he said, “I tuck into my shell like a turtle.” He misses classes at the university, meetings, and doctor’s appointments, including mental health counseling sessions. He is disturbed by recollections of the war and questions about the value of his military service. “I hate to look at what we did and be like, there was no purpose or reason for that. But, sometimes— yeah. And I don’t know where I stand on it. I mean, the country was running okay under Saddam. Did we do something good by removing him..? Was he as bad as everyone says..? I have no idea.” Like most of the study’s participants, he faces those tensions and stresses everyday. For Huda, too, the effects of trauma manifest on a regular basis. She fought to keep her home in Baghdad until repeated death threats forced her to leave. In the aftermath, loud noises or situations of distress that conjure memories of the war leave her distraught. Once, she said, a vehicle passed her office in California with sirens blaring. “I was shaking for five minutes. I couldn’t work, I start crying. And people, my coworker— ‘Why are you crying?’ The sound.” Not only does the trauma affect her new life in California, but as a result she also feels she cannot return to Iraq as long as it continues to be a warzone. This means she cannot visit her elderly mother or other family members that are still in Baghdad.

Although it is to be expected that both groups suffer from the effects of trauma, the topic was not frequently or directly discussed among the Iraqis or veterans. Advisors and officials within their communities are aware of this unspoken subject and make various attempts to address it. I observed such an effort one Friday when the imam at Noor’s mosque presented the subject of trauma in a sermon after the *dhur* (noon) congregation prayer. The imam acknowledged that issues of mental health were prevalent in the community, which includes a large number of refugees. He noted that there is no shame in being emotionally stressed and he encouraged them to call on the support of their religion and the community. It was important to turn to medical professionals, he added, if the problems lasted more than a few weeks or were overwhelming. Noor was visibly moved by the sermon, wiping away a silent flow of tears as she listened. Attending services at the mosque was one way that she and other Iraqis in this study garnered support for the challenges they face. While it was rare for refugees in my study to discuss their traumas among themselves, they frequently visited each other at their homes and would often broach questions related to their daily struggles beyond the topic of trauma. Their network was obviously emotionally supportive and constructive, even if they generally abstained from specifically addressing questions of mental health.

As for the veterans in this study, all were connected to university support groups and outside organizations for veterans, which met some of their emotional needs. Like the Iraqis, many of the

veterans were hesitant to discuss their specific mental health needs, but a great number were also active supporters of their communities, helping new veterans acclimate to their civilian lives, offering advice on the GI Bill to recently admitted students, and hosting social events to strengthen the support network. In addition, a number of veterans who received mental health counseling were able to gently encourage their friends and peers to do the same. Sean described that he initially refused to seek professional support but followed through at the prompting of a fellow veteran. “Long story short, [my buddy] was pretty convinced that I had some issues that I needed to take care of.” He committed to regular counseling sessions to help cope with the trauma and stresses incurred from the war. As his mental state improved, he began working as a peer-mentor to help other veterans deal with the effects of trauma. Sean organized social events to connect with new arrivals and conducted extensive outreach. “I’ll talk with them if they’re having a rough time, call them if I can’t make it down [to their location].” Some of the veterans in this study also availed themselves of alcohol, marijuana, or other intoxicating substances for relief from the pressures of the aftermath.

While many of the mental health needs of those in this study could be connected to PTSD, a large number of the veterans also related symptoms of serious distress that were not connected to a traumatic event as defined by the American Psychiatric Association. Rather than having a response to a threat to their self or others that induced feelings of helplessness or fear, many of the veterans experienced anxiety that was more closely linked to an evaluation of their own perpetration of violence during the war. In the 1980s and 90s, clinical therapist Jonathan Shay treated a large number of Vietnam veterans who were afflicted with symptoms common to PTSD such as persistent distress, anger and severe depression, but the source of their condition was also not a classic trauma as delineated by the APA. He deduced that his patients were impaired by an emotional backlash for having committed acts in the war that conflicted with their core values as Americans and, more simply, as human beings. Shay introduced the term “moral injury” to help diagnose what he observed to be their negative self-critiques for having violated their fundamental beliefs, and the subsequent degradation of their moral identities and the loss of meaning.⁴² Symptoms include guilt, shame, anxiety, depression, anger, a desire to redress the transgression, and a loss of the will to live. Whereas PTSD is an expression of a dysfunction of certain areas of the brain, moral injury depends on a healthy brain with the capacity for critical thinking and empathy, because an individual will have a moral injury only if he or she acknowledges the recipient of the transgression.

⁴² Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. New York: Scribner, 1994:20. Print. For related reading that deals with veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, see Shay, Jonathan. *The Undoing of Character and Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*. New York: Scribner, 2003. Print.

Moral injury clarifies the emotional struggles related by many of the veterans in Chapter Two. They were obligated to complete their duties in Iraq and nearly all were uninformed and incognizant of the extent of the war's damages while they were serving in the military. After the war, many acknowledged that they participated in a conflict thick with moral ambiguities, waged on false pretense against an ill-defined enemy amid a civilian population. The result was a troubling aftermath of self-doubt, anxiety and depression. Andy, for example, recalled the conflict he had with translating intercepted Arabic conversations. He applied his language skills to help bring about the deaths of Arabic speakers with whom he had some affinity and whose deaths were perhaps unwarranted in his mind, thereby contradicting his moral beliefs. His moral injury surfaced when he returned to the U.S. and was forced to suspend his university studies. He reported that those issues caused him emotional turmoil and troubled his personal relationships in a manner similarly drastic to the effects of PTSD. Although he managed some of the symptoms and was able to return to his studies, Andy continues to struggle with the repercussions of having violated his moral code. Other expressions of moral injuries include Brent's unease about having held hostage the elderly man, Sean's discomfort with having fought on sacred land, and Tony's horror at having been obligated to kill unwitting trespassers at his base.

On the receiving end of such transgressions were Iraqis like Mustafa and Huda, who were bereaved, threatened, and uprooted by the American-led conflict. Others were so-called 'civilian casualties of war' like Noor's brother, Bashar, who was killed without apparent reason at the onset of the war and whose death affected his family, friends, and neighbors. Bashar's brother-in-law, Mustafa, responded to the injustice with indignation and sadness, and he was angry not only with the individual anonymous perpetrators but also with the entire American military and the American people who sponsored them. The effect of one transgression on the part of a single soldier would thus have greater reach than the life of the initial recipient, and broader implications than the reputation of the individual perpetrator. Evidence of the broader ramifications of similar situations can be seen through the U.S. military interventions in the Middle East since the mid-twentieth century and the tragic retaliation of September 11th.

Orla Muldoon and Robert Lowe posit that "PTSD is no longer to be seen as an interaction between an individual and a specific event. Instead it is best viewed as an individual operating within a specific social context and attempting (or not attempting) to reintegrate into that social context subsequent to the traumatizing event."⁴³ This approach is applicable to the veterans' moral injuries, because it was the very context of American societal values that caused a conflict for the veterans as they fulfilled their

⁴³ Muldoon, Orla T. and Robert D. Lowe. "Social Identity, Groups, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." *Political Psychology* 33 (2012): 2. Web.

military duties during the war. Most of the veterans were raised by the core civilian values of respecting other people and not harming or killing those who were innocent, but they were deployed to a war so lacking in an ethical foundation that they had to breach those basic guidelines. The veterans then returned to the same social context where they were raised, but they bore the heavy weight of actions that would normally be condemned by the society into which they were attempting to reintegrate. The tension was acute for many of the veterans in this study, who moved to a politically liberal state and then entered the context of a university that heightened their thought process to critically review the broader Islamophobic and anti-Arab conflict in which they participated. As indicated by the staggering number of veteran suicides across the nation, the end result of such inescapable self-critique were often feelings of helplessness, depression and, in some cases, suicide.⁴⁴ A national, multidimensional discussion about veterans, refugees, and the responsibility of American civilians and elected officials in relationship to the war would help address some of these wounds and begin a process of healing. Unfortunately, as the refugees and veterans in this study struggled to reestablish their lives in California, they met a society that was generally uninformed about the progression of the war and seemingly unconcerned with its effects.

NAVIGATING THE DISCONNECT

With the geographical distance of Iraq from the U.S. and the American normalization of the ‘War on Terror,’ most Americans were physically and emotionally detached from the war’s repercussions. The Iraq war veterans comprise about 1% of the American population and the Iraqi refugees, too, are not a large enough group as to be easily visible to the uninformed public. The result among the refugees and veterans in this study was that they felt they were struggling to navigate the aftermath alone. That experience of isolation is the third shared theme of the aftermath.

Jeremy, for example, often felt disconnected from his university peer group because most did not share his experience of the war. “I’d go out with friends, you know, and I’d be scanning rooftops [for snipers]. But I couldn’t explain that to them. How do you explain something like that?” Unable to find adequate words to describe his situation, he frequently felt out of place. For the refugees, the English language itself remains a barrier to their effective communication with many Americans. Noor is studying the language but her fluency is still limited, so it is difficult for her to communicate in English even if she has a receptive audience. She expressed her feelings to me by reciting an Arabic poem written by another Iraqi refugee in California, Hibba Hani. The autobiographical poem, the title of which translates as “Photo

⁴⁴ Glantz, Aaron. *The War Comes Home: Washington's Battle Against America's Veterans*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. Print.

Album of a Homeland,” evokes images of the author’s forced transition from Iraq to the United States due to the 2003 war.⁴⁵ The poem revolves around seven photos and each passage depicts a different component of the difficult move. Noor recited the poem as if its words were her own, slowing on a stanza about her heart and soul still being in “the country,” in Iraq.

حاولت تكرارا ان اقنع نفسي بان سان فرانسيسكو كبغداد
I tried again to convince my soul that San Francisco was like Baghdad
 لكن
But
 ناطحة سحاب واحدة تحسسني بانني صغيرة !!
A single skyscraper reminded me that I am so small!!
 قلبي يسكن بلاد
My heart lives in the country
 روحي تسكن بلاد
My spirit lives in the country
 جسدي هنا يبحث عن هذا وذاك
And my body is here, searching for this and that...

Noor paused after reciting that her body aimlessly wandered in search of fellow Iraqi refugees who could be distinguished by the tears in their eyes and their greeting of “*shaku maku?*” (How are you?), while her soul was in Baghdad.⁴⁶ Through the words of the poem, she spoke of being disconnected from the people and places around her in the United States. Despite the English language barrier, she eloquently conveyed her feelings in the context of her conversation with me.

A large number of the study’s participants anticipated that the public lacked an understanding of their experiences, which, they feared, might warrant negative judgment. Some of the veterans with signs of moral injuries expressed concern that the actions they took in fulfilling their duties as soldiers contradicted the civilian code of conduct and thus could evoke public scrutiny. Andy fears being misunderstood by his peers because the age gap might preclude their familiarity with the background and justifications of the Iraq war.

It’s just hard to communicate [with my non-veteran peers]. What do I talk about? I have three– and it’s hard for me not to say kids– I have three kids sit next to me in one of my classes and all three of ’em are freshmen.... And like, I don’t know what else to talk about, about the decade that we don’t have in common. And then I think about it, and I go, uh, so you were eight when 9/11 happened. That’s kinda weird. That’s a little bit weird.

⁴⁵ Hani, Hibba. “Photo Album of a Homeland,” (Arabic, my translation). 2009. Complete Arabic text available online: <http://twitmail.com/email/396155805/142/false>.

⁴⁶ The phrase “*shaku maku*” is a common Iraqi Arabic greeting meaning “How are you?”

Andy's concern about being judged prevents him from speaking openly with non-veteran students. He navigates that sense of disconnect by spending time with other veterans at his university with whom he can comfortably share his thoughts. Even with civilians that are knowledgeable about the conflict, Andy is hesitant to share his full story because of the general American disapproval of the war. In the case of this study, for example, he was at first unwilling to speak with me about his military service in Iraq. Once he assessed that the research environment was safe, however, he actually volunteered his story with great enthusiasm, ease and appreciation for the opportunity to speak freely.

Most of the Iraqi refugees shared similar fears of public judgment. Huda was at first distrustful of speaking candidly with her coworkers in California because many expressed negative perception of Iraqis, Arabs and Muslims. "They thought that... the women there [in Iraq] are wearing the *burqa*, or they are not working, or they are slaves. No.... You know, we're not what you see on media. Sometimes media would like to give a bad example." She attempted to dispel those myths by presenting herself in an honest and positive light and, eventually, by answering her coworkers' questions about her lifestyle and beliefs. "Since I came to the United States, I was a good role model for everybody. Like, I work hard, I show them that...we are nice, we are kind, we are generous.... When I told them that I am from Iraq, I change their point of view." Zeinab is a *muḥajiba*,⁴⁷ so her clothing identifies her as a Muslim, and she worries that strangers will stereotype her as being a "violent Arab" if she gets angry in public. Once, her young child was misbehaving in a store, grabbing merchandise and running around. Zeinab needed to reprimand her child, but she was concerned about negative reactions from Americans shoppers in the vicinity if she spoke too loudly or appeared angry. With the Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism that became widespread after 9/11, a trivial incident in the supermarket could gain disastrous momentum. She fears religious discrimination on top of the common struggles that immigrants encounter in a new country. Noor recounted how her children and her friends' children have been taunted by their classmates with accusations of being terrorists. "This [Iraqi] girl go to school– they tell her 'bomb, bomb.'" Due to similar harassment in the schools, Noor explained, many families returned to Iraq despite the terrible conditions.

All of the study's participants turned to their respective communities for support in the face of that isolation, but some also felt disconnected from the majority of people in their own groups. That internal disconnect was mainly a result of their dissent from the mainstream political and social views. Weston, who had begun to dispute the legitimacy of the Iraq war while he was still deployed, was unsettled when strangers in the U.S. thanked him for his military service, and he was similarly critical of

⁴⁷ Arabic: a woman who wears the *ḥijāb*, a veil that covers the hair and neck in accordance with Islamic standards of piety and modesty.

his veteran peers' self-congratulatory attitudes. "It was just, kind of some of the same chest-patting stuff that I was not really, like, keen on anymore." His political beliefs led him to feel ostracized by many veterans at his university student group. "I was not that welcomed... when it became apparent that I was against the war." Instead, he found his place with veteran activists against the war who shared his perspectives. A few other veterans in the study also felt excluded by the group based on differences in political belief, while still others expressed their concerns in private but publicly replaced their questions about the war's legitimacy with bravado and enthusiasm for their military service. The Iraqi refugees generally had close-knit relationships throughout their local communities, but a few felt somewhat distant from the rest. Karwan and Nabil, for example, enjoy the benefits of their new lives in California and do not fully identify with the collective refugee struggle to replace what was lost, but they still maintain ties with the community to preserve and celebrate their culture. An Iraqi named Samir, on the other hand, was satisfied with his life in Iraq and did not want to move to California, but he was one of the few who quickly found a job with a good salary. Samir is rebuilding a satisfactory life for himself and his family, and he described that many in the local community are jealous of his job, nosy about his personal life, and gossip behind his back. This behavior has prompted him to distance himself from most of the Iraqi refugee in his neighborhood, although he and his family maintain ties with a few, select families and participate in a limited number of the community celebrations.

Some of the study's participants feel that they have been forgotten by the American public and government officials in the wake of that disconnect. Harold, who served several tours in Iraq, observed that "a lot of these veterans, you know, get out of the war... and they're pretty much tossed away like yesterday's garbage. They're forgotten." When he returned from Iraq in 2008, he had attempted to secure a job prior to attending college but found that there was little support for veterans. "Once the uniform comes off, it's like, '[Screw] you. Who are you?'... We're forgotten." He applied for more than 400 jobs and was repeatedly rejected, despite extensive military qualifications, until finally he found brief employment on a construction site. He was frustrated by the lack of job prospects and the shortcomings of the U.S. government in regards to post-service support. When he enrolled in his university, Harold's experience that the military, government and public were disconnected from the needs of veterans influenced his choice of major. He has since become an effective advocate for veterans' rights and intends to pursue further education to improve his abilities. Harold's discontent with his job prospects echoed Mustafa's dismay at the lack of services for incoming Iraqis and the feeling of abandonment. However, since the passage of the VOW Act of 2011 and his attendance at a prestigious university, Harold's prospects for employment increased, while Mustafa's options, unfortunately, remained dismal.

Members of both groups wanted their stories to be heard, in order that they might relieve some of their isolation, but many expressed that they had been unable to share. Zeinab was wary of publicizing her

experiences, what with the death threats she encountered in Iraq and the animosity she has perceived from many Americans. She feared unknown dangers that she might bring upon herself or her family but, like everyone else in this study, she eagerly shared her experiences once she felt comfortable with the nature of the study. Tony revealed that he had not related his military experiences to any civilians, even with his family members or friends, prior to his interview with me.

There was never really an exchange. Maybe a few friends where we just joked about stuff or they asked questions, but it was nothing like this!... And I'm really close with my siblings, my parents [...but] it's just like, hey, I come home, my parents are still hardworking people.... Not that they're so incredibly busy, but... when I came home we never really talked about it. So this is like, kinda like the first time.

His interview, nearly five years after he returned from Iraq, was the first time he divulged to a civilian the details of his “football field” or the “hairy situations” that prompted its creation. Tony made various conjectures as to why he had never spoken at great length with his family or friends. He did not want to burden his busy family, he said, and he judged that they, in turn, perhaps thought he needed space for the intense process that they assumed he was going through. During the interview, however, he said it was exceptional to experience “the comfort that we can have right here, of just like letting your hair down and really talking about things.” After feeling so isolated from his family and the general public, Tony was relieved to finally break the silence. Sharing his story with me, a civilian, allowed him an initial relief from the guilt and anxiety associated with his moral injury from having killed innocent people in Iraq. Perhaps knowing that his story has been delivered to countless readers will lead to further healing and open a larger, public dialogue about the aftermath.

Many participants hoped that sharing their stories for this research might help mitigate some of the broader problems associated with the war. Greg explained that he was grateful I was seeking out veterans for their personal opinions. “Yeah I just think it's really cool that anybody [...is] interested. Not just you know, like... dates and events or whatever, but like how we *think* and like *feel* about this stuff.” He believes it is vital for veterans to talk about what happened in the war and after, because “that's the only way you get like everybody, collectively in the community, to understand this— like, the bigger picture.” Mustafa agreed with Greg's sentiment, articulating the need for greater discussion about what happened to the people involved.

And by the way, there is misinformation between the [people]. Maybe you can help with that. Because, in Middle East, we have misinformation about the United States. And also the American people they don't know us. They are— they thought we are still on the camels, and we are just want to kill everybody, and maybe, after a hundred years we can be like them. (*Laughs.*)

Like Huda, Mustafa hopes he is informing American perspectives through his presence in the United States. As part of that effort, he wrote a letter to President Obama to communicate the challenges with which he and many others in his group were contending. While he acknowledged that his letter might not have a large impact on public policy, he said, “it’s important still to try to do something, you know? We need to do something.” Like the majority of veterans in this study, Mustafa and many of the Iraqis are also modifying their own views. Although he knew very little about Americans before the war and had formed a negative opinion of them due to the conflict, by 2011 Mustafa said he trusted his American neighbors to help him if he knocked on their doors. He expressed surprise at this change. “I didn’t imagine I would be familiar, and I have American friends and a good community here.”

TOWARDS HEALING

As the refugees find a place in American society and the veterans resume their civilian lives, both groups are trying to cope with the combined effect of the isolation, trauma and major changes that occurred in their daily lives. They seek healing, meeting with others in their group for collaboration and support as they try to connect with the public. The refugees are rebuilding their lives even as they mourn their losses and long for their homeland. They are searching for jobs and new careers, sending their children to public schools, furnishing their homes, and forging connections with their American coworkers and neighbors. Alongside these developments, they come together as a unified Iraqi community to support each other, celebrate holidays and preserve their traditions. The veterans are also slowly healing while exploring new identities as students and professionals. They socialize in the context of the university and with outside support groups, where they find comfort, support and opportunities to reflect on their experiences. Many are expanding their knowledge by learning about Iraqis, Arabs, Muslims, and the history and cultures of the Middle East. In turn, some of the veterans and refugees have been reaching out to elected officials and the general public to share their challenges and stories, reduce Islamophobia, and advocate for legislation and national attention to address their needs after the war. Beyond the appeal of a more rounded analysis of the conflict, it is from this chapter’s combined examination of the postwar situations of the veterans and refugees that we can begin to appreciate the necessity of employing a multifaceted approach in addressing the war’s aftermath. The case of the veterans’ moral injuries is one example of how the identities and aftermath experiences of the refugees and veterans are mutually constitutive. Without public acknowledgment of both groups’ experiences and their relationship to each other, many of their individual injuries have been left untended, to the serious detriment of the Iraqi refugees, the American veterans, and American society as a whole.

CONCLUSION

I undertook this research intending to learn how the Iraq war has affected American veterans and Iraqi refugees in California, and I hoped to investigate any overlap or commonalities between the two groups' experiences. I was also curious about what relationship exists between the two groups today. As I collected their narratives, I imagined that I could tell an intertwined story of the war's impact on their lives to this day. What was obvious, of course, was that they had all survived various aspects of the same war, and that a significant population of each group then resettled in the same location, sometimes in the same city, halfway across the world from the conflict. This nexus was not obvious to the American public around them, nor did my informants know their close proximity to members of the other group. The quiet aftermath of the war was unnerving in that respect. It seemed a strange scene to go unnoticed by the general American public, and even by the participants themselves: refugees and veterans rebuilding their lives in California, beginning from opposite points but moving in tandem toward professional opportunities, even as moments of their shared history continually threatened to upset their goals.

As I drew deeper into the lives and histories of these people, the stories within each group were so complex and their idiosyncrasies as yet undocumented that I had to first focus on each group

individually before analyzing them in concert. What I found, as I hope I have illustrated, is that the aftermath existed in a zone geographically distant from Iraq but its effects were still potent in the lives of the study's participants. In this paper, I argue that the most salient aspects of the aftermath in the lives of the Iraqi refugees and the American veteran were shared and can be understood through the mutually drastic changes they experienced in their professional and personal lives as well as their experience of surviving a war that was largely unacknowledged by the American public. Both groups experienced a dramatic shift in professional status because of the war, seemingly exchanging social standing and related opportunities. While the postwar experience for each veteran was characterized by attendance at a competitive university and an accompanying rise in status, the reality for the Iraqis was generally an opposite fall to entry-level positions, if any, where they were accorded little status. This change was somewhat disorienting for both groups because their status and opportunities in the aftermath were so strikingly different from what each experienced before the war, but whereas one situation was of increased privilege, the other was of demeaning loss. That dynamic shift for both groups was one of three shared experiences that included isolation from society while navigating repercussions of the war's traumas. These were the most significant features of the aftermath within each group and they also emphasized the interconnectedness of the two groups. Despite the seemingly disparate nature of veterans and refugees, those in this study had a surprising amount in common. It was further apparent from the backlash of the war's moral injuries that the injustices, misunderstandings and senseless casualties of the Iraq war will self-perpetuate to greater levels of disaster unless the American public were to make a collective effort to recognize and address each side of the conflict.

One limitation of analyzing the narratives of two very distinct groups such as the Iraqi refugees and the American veterans is that depth might be compromised in favor of breadth. I hope that my examination of both groups, whom some readers have called opposing or unrelated, offers more insight into the aftermath of the war than could have been gained through an analysis of only one. I believe that a more intertwined discussion of their lives is possible than what has been undertaken in this modest thesis, and I hope to see further studies about the Iraq war and similar conflicts. Researchers could address the full human extent of the aftermath by evaluating the war's combined impact on Iraqi nationals that remained in their country, Iraqi refugees around the world and their international hosts, as well as non-American soldiers, military family members, legislators, aid-workers, journalists, contractors, researchers, and future generations that inherit the residue of the conflict. Such ethnographic work might mitigate some of the damage and prompt improved legislation to support the refugees, veterans, and other casualties. Preferably such studies would be published in the languages of all those affected, so that the maximum advantage might be gained. No amount of resources or time can restore what the Iraqis lost, nor will the veterans ever forget the war's haunting images or their participation in it, but concentrated

efforts to study the aftermath of war in a multifaceted manner would help assuage the injuries on all sides, reduce the toll of future conflicts and perhaps avoid the recurrence of such tragedies altogether.

Although this thesis is necessarily limited in scope, I hope it has illuminated the topic for colleagues in the fields of Middle Eastern studies, conflict analysis, race and gender studies, refugee assistance, veterans' affairs, and public policy. It is my intention that readers are equipped with a more accurate, nuanced and critical perspective of the aftermath of the Iraq war and the broader implications of the American War on Terror. These findings may be of benefit both to experts in the subject and to individuals with few connections to the conflict. Hopefully, this paper is also useful to the American veterans and Iraqi refugees in this study whose stories have never before been told, as well as to those who expressed interest in the perspectives of the "Other." If nothing else, I hope the personal narratives herein are as informative, inspiring, and humbling to my audience as they have been for me.

APPENDIX: TIMELINE OF SELECT EVENTS OF THE IRAQ WAR

- September 11, 2001** Al-Qaeda terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. President George W. Bush responded with a televised speech declaring that the U.S. would “make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.”
- September 15, 2001** A war cabinet meeting convened at Camp David, where Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld encouraged the President to target Iraq. Top CIA officials argued against any connection between Saddam Hussein and the terrorist attacks.
- September 18, 2001** President Bush authorized the use of force in retribution against terrorists affiliated with the 9/11 attacks.
- October 7, 2001** The war in Afghanistan, called “Operation Enduring Freedom” by the U.S. military, began.
- March 19/20, 2003** The war in Iraq, “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” began under the pretext that Iraq supported terrorists and had weapons of mass destruction. 90,000 American troops deployed to Iraq in the month of March. (*Note:* The initial incursion took place the morning of March 20th according to Iraqi time, which was the evening of March 19th in the U.S.)
- April 9, 2003** American soldiers and Iraqi civilians pulled down a statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square, Baghdad. Nearly 150,000 American troops had been deployed to Iraq at this point.
- May 1, 2003** President Bush declared the successful end to major combat operations in Iraq.
- September 30, 2003** Nearly 300 Iraqi refugees moved to the U.S. in the 2003 fiscal year.
- January 24, 2004** The Bush administration acknowledged that Saddam Hussein did not have the presumed store of weapons for chemical, biological or nuclear warfare.
- March 31, 2004** Four contractors from Blackwater USA were killed, prompting the First Battle of Fallujah.
- August 5-27, 2004** The Battle of Najaf ensued.
- November 8, 2004** The Second Battle of Fallujah began. 137 American soldiers and an unknown number of Iraqi and other combatants were killed.
- December 13, 2004** Saddam Hussein was captured in Operation Red Dawn.
- January 30, 2005** The Iraqi legislative election was held. 159,000 American soldiers were in Iraq at the time.
- March 3, 2005** A total of 1,500 American soldiers had died in Iraq since 2003.
- February 22, 2006** The Hassan al-Askari Mosque was bombed, prompting an escalation of sectarian violence across Iraq.
- May 20, 2006** Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Malaki assumed office in Iraq.

November 2006	President Bush was reelected, and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld resigned.
December 30, 2006	Saddam Hussein was executed.
September 30, 2006	Nearly 200 Iraqi refugees moved to the U.S. in 2006.
January 10, 2007	President Bush announced a surge of 20,000 troops to secure Baghdad. General Petraeus replaced General Casey.
January 28, 2007	The Second Battle of Najaf began.
February 3, 2007	A suicide truck bomb in a Baghdad market killed at least 135 people and injured hundreds more.
June 13, 2007	The Hassan Al-Askari Mosque was bombed a second time.
September 16, 2007	Blackwater personnel killed 17 Iraqi civilians, prompting the U.S. State Department to revoke Blackwater's contracting license.
October 2007	More than 166,000 American soldiers were in Iraq at this time, which was the highest number for the duration of the war.
November 4, 2008	President Barack Obama was elected.
February 1, 2009	President Obama announced his plan to end the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Suicide attacks and Iraqi deaths continued to escalate, while American deaths in Iraq declined to their lowest point since the war's beginning. The number of American troops in Iraq continued to decline, with nearly 138,000 present at the time.
August 3, 2009	President Obama passed the Post-9/11 GI Bill to improve financial support for veteran education and housing.
September 30, 2009	Nearly 19,000 Iraqi refugees moved to the U.S. in 2009.
March 7, 2010	The Iraqi parliamentary election was held.
October 2010	The number of American troops in Iraq had been reduced to 48,000.
January 18, 2011	A suicide bomber in Tikrit killed 63 people.
September 30, 2011	More than 9,000 Iraqi refugees moved to the U.S. in 2011.
December 18, 2011	The last American soldiers in Iraq withdrew, except for a number of troops to guard the embassy, officially ending the U.S. military presence in the country.
December 19, 2011	Shiite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki ordered the arrest of Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, breaking the pact agreed upon with the Americans to maintain a bipartisan government.

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GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

American War Veteran (Veteran): a former military service member in the U.S. Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, or Navy.

Ba'athism: a political ideology based on a collection of tenets from Arab nationalism, pan-Arabism, socialism and anti-colonialism. The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in Iraq gained momentum in the 1960s, with Saddam Hussein using it as an instrument of power, stabilization and control of Iraq until 2003.

GI Bill: the common term for an American law that guarantees financial provision for educational expenses of honorably discharged veterans. Originally passed by President Roosevelt in 1944 as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act to help veterans returning from World War II attend college.

International Organization for Immigration (IOM): an international organization that aids migrants and promotes social and economic development based on migration.

Moral Injury: a negative self-critique for violating one's fundamental beliefs that involves a degradation in the moral identity of the self and a loss of meaning.

muḥajiba: (Arabic) a woman who wears the *ḥijāb*, a veil that covers the hair and neck in accordance with Islamic standards of piety and modesty.

Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR): an American government organization responsible for the resettlement of refugees in the U.S., including programs to provide housing, job search assistance, medical care, and child support for incoming refugees.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF): the American military term for the war in Afghanistan that began in 2001.

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF): the American military term for the war in Iraq from 2003 to 2011.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): as defined by the American Psychiatric Association, a neurological response to being confronted with an event that seriously threatened the physical integrity of the self or others, and that also produced intense feelings of helplessness, fear, or horror.

Professional development: as defined in this paper, the pursuit of a university degree and then employment or other career opportunities based on that academic capital.

Refugee: according to the United Nations, an individual forced to seek asylum outside of his or her country because of a threat of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social status or political opinion.

Special Immigration Visa (SIV): in the case of the Iraq war, a visa for resettlement in the U.S. for eligible Iraqis employed by the American government for at least one full year between 2003 and 2009.

US Department of Veteran Affairs (VA): an American government organization for processing military benefits related to areas such as education and healthcare.