

From Iraq to the US: A Refugee Trajectory of the Professional Class

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They called me, the United Nation in Syria, they told me, you have resettlement program. [...] We went there, for interview, and they told us, you are gonna go to the United States of America. I told them, I have not very good background with the United State, because I just run away from them, you know? From what happened in my country. I can't, I dont know my future over there, how it's gonna be. So. They told me, it's not your choice. United State, or go back to Baghdad.

The excerpt you just heard is from an interview with an Iraqi refugee whom I will call Mustafa, an engineer displaced from his homeland by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Mustafa is one of an estimated 4 million Iraqi refugees, and one of the nearly 2 million since the start of the war that have been able to get out of the country [3]. Mustafa is one of 30 thousand Iraqi refugees, mainly professionals, that have resettled in this country to rebuild their homes and livelihoods after the war [5]. You might ask, why would an Iraqi refugee end up in the United States, the country that invaded Iraq? Which demographic of people would have the means and willpower to take up residence in a nation that destroyed their own? And what was that journey like, leaving a war-torn nation and joining another so distant from the battlefield, yet so connected?

My name is Maia Wolins, and the title of my paper is "From Iraq to the US: A Refugee Trajectory of the Professional Class." My advisor is Professor Emily Gottreich and my major is Middle Eastern Studies. This paper is a preliminary report on my findings for my senior honors thesis, an ethnographic study on the effects of the 2003 war in Iraq as it relates to the professional development of Iraqi refugees and U.S. veterans in America. In this paper, I will illustrate that there are 3 main stages in the trajectory of the professional class of Iraqi refugees to the U.S: their violent displacement from their homeland; their temporary relocation to a neighboring country; and their stable resettlement in the U.S. My methods for assessing the refugee trajectory include participant observation

in local communities, transcription of archived interviews from Citizens Reach Out, and my own qualitative interviews with Iraqi refugees. My conceptual analysis in this paper involves Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital and Aihwa Ong's notion of flexible citizenship.

Symbolic capital is an accumulation of resources that give status in a field of power [1]. The field could be imagined as an arena like academia, ballet or engineering. Agents within a field compete for resources and positions that lead to further symbolic capital, which could also translate into greater economic wealth. For example, by presenting my research at this conference, I am gaining higher status, or academic capital, within the field of academia. My experience today is a resource that distinguishes me from the average undergraduate and takes me one step closer to the position of a graduate student, or beyond that, a professor. This increase in academic capital might also mean more economic capital in the form of a higher salary. We encounter Ong's notion of flexible citizenship when we transpose globalization and transnationalism onto this picture. An agent with flexible citizenship has access to social fields of power in multiple nation-states, and therefore increased opportunity for symbolic capital, which could translate into greater economic capital [4]. I will expand on the concepts of symbolic capital and flexible citizenship throughout this paper. But, whereas Ong focuses on flexible citizenship as a choice of the elite, I examine it as a forced disposition in the case of Iraqi refugees from the professional class. I'll begin my analysis with the Iraqi process of becoming a professional and what happened to agents in the professional field when the US invaded in 2003. This is the first stage of the refugee trajectory.

A woman whom I will call Zeinab is one of many Iraqis displaced as she fled the sectarian violence that erupted after the U.S. invasion. She came here two years ago with her husband, leaving behind her parents, her life as a lab technician, and her wedding gifts that were barely a week old. Zeinab's path to becoming a lab technician and gaining professional capital was traditional for many well-to-do families in Iraq. She was raised in an upper-class neighborhood of Baghdad, expecting to become a doctor or engineer. In high school, she took a placement test whose score determined what college she would enter. A student with a score of 90% or higher might go on to become a doctor or pharmacist, while those with a score in the 80's, such as Zeinab, went on to the School of Agriculture in Baghdad. Her family teased that she would become a farmer, but Zeinab took classes in chemistry, physics, biotechnology, and microbiology. Upon graduation in 2001, she became a technician in the laboratories at the University.

Her college sweetheart courted her for the next five years while she cultured bacteria in the labs. He was Shi'a, she was Sunni. "It was a love story," she told me. He was the outgoing, helpful, handsome type, and she was beautiful but shy. Although the U.S. invasion in 2003 and the resulting war made it difficult to see each other often, the couple finally married in 2006. They shared a simple but happy wedding, despite the subdued atmosphere. That year saw a dramatic increase in sectarian violence, after attacks destroyed the Hassan al-Askari mosque, a holy site to Shi'a Muslims. All Iraqis felt the growing

tension, and the stress became personal when Zeinab's new father-in-law was murdered by Iraqi militia just one week after the wedding. The affiliations of Zeinab's husband and father-in-law with Saddam Hussein's regime, and the family's status as professionals, made them all obvious targets of the violence. The newlyweds feared for their lives, and fled the country a few days later, the smell of new furniture still permeating their unused room in the house of Zeinab's late father-in-law.

Today, most upper- and middle-class Iraqis have engaged their material wealth and social connections to escape the rising death toll and crumbling infrastructure in their country [6]. They leave behind a nation of overwhelming devastation and a majority of fellow Iraqi citizens who are too poor to claim professional or material capital as a means of escape. For those fortunate enough to leave, namely the professional class, they face daunting challenges as their journey continues. Next is the second stage of their trajectory: temporary relocation for safety in neighboring countries: mainly Syria or Jordan. There, opportunities for professional growth through symbolic capital are limited by government restrictions on refugees.

A woman whom I will call Farah was an English teacher in Baghdad with a husband and two kids. She, too, was chased from her country by sectarian violence that erupted after the US invasion. After a harrowing car ride through Iraq with her family, Farah arrived in Syria. But prospects, at first, seemed bleak because in Syria it is illegal for refugees to become employed. So Farah tapped into her professional symbolic capital and slipped past employment laws. Using her teaching certificate from Iraq and the strength of her experience as a professional, she found work as a private English tutor. Life was still difficult, but at least she could keep her family afloat while they waited for a permanent visa to another country.

But she was soon hit with a terrible blow: her brother was kidnapped as he and his family attempted to leave Iraq. Members of the Mehdi militia, mere teenagers, dragged him out of his car, beat him unconscious in front of his wife and kids, then drove away with him. Farah was crushed when her other siblings in Iraq told her the news of his violent kidnapping. She then waited, helpless, as her remaining brothers searched all of Baghdad for him. There was no trace for four and a half months, until finally his body turned up in a morgue near the scene of his attack. Farah was devastated but did her best to continue supporting her husband and children despite the unbearable burden of her brother's death.

Meanwhile, Syria had become overwhelmed with refugees. Rumors flew that the government was cracking down, sending refugees back to Iraq immediately after their three-month residence expired. Just in time, the International Organization for Migration offered Farah a visa to Germany. Although she had proven her adaptability to living in a new country, the German language barrier would have been too great. So she asked for placement in Canada with her sister-in-law. Instead, they gave her 24 hours to decide on a final, non-negotiable offer of a visa to America.

Farah did not know what to do. She staunchly opposed the idea of moving

to a country that had invaded her own—a country that holds much of the responsibility for the destruction of her homeland, the interruption of her life, and the explosion of the sectarian violence that caused her brother's death. And yet, she could not remain in Syria. She was caught in a paradox: either reject the visa and risk forced return to Iraq, where death and destruction awaited; or accept it and move to the US, the country that caused so much of her suffering. Like Mustafa, Farah felt there was only one viable option: "It was not a choice, but that's it, you have to accept it. So we decided to accept it" [2]. Thus she accepted her paradoxical situation by deciding to take the visa and move to the United States.

This brings us to the third stage of the refugee trajectory: stable resettlement in the US. This stage may be the most difficult, though also the most promising. Transnationalism was previously a forced disposition for the refugees, but in this last stage we see how a social agent can choose flexible citizenship as a means of overcoming the crisis.

Mustafa, the Iraqi whose quote I began with, came to America with dreams. But his American dream is not necessarily one of home ownership, a large TV, and free speech—although these are important aspects of his life here. More importantly, his dream lies in the education of his children at California universities, the accumulation of greater professional capital, and the eventual possibility of his return to Iraq. He hopes his children can t in with the local population; the oldest complained last week of being mistaken for a Mexican immigrant.

He arrived as a refugee in the U.S. two years ago with an engineering degree from Baghdad University, along with his wife, who was a journalist in Iraq, and their three kids, who range in age from toddler to teen. Before that, he traveled a similar path of trauma, loss, and dislocation as we saw in the first two stages of the trajectory. He lost his private business as an engineer, and many friends and family. But he continues to push forward. He quickly got recertified as an engineer here in the U.S., using the symbolic capital of his English skills to pass the exams in three of the six months it normally takes for recertification.

However, despite this advantage, Mustafa has yet to find a job in engineering. He applied to over three hundred jobs, working his way down the pay-scale, until he finally got an entry-level clerical position at a hotel. Although he is frustrated by the menial nature of his job, he does it for his kids. "Some Iraqis get here, they've just arrived in America, and they have no hopes, no dreams. But my wife and I, we dont have a choice. We have three kids, we have to dream, we have to keep moving forward." Ever hopeful for the future, he is looking into acquiring more symbolic capital through a new certificate, in project management, that might cost him a few thousand dollars to obtain here at Berkeley. This is no easy sum for a refugee, but if he were to return to Iraq or another Arab country with a degree from an American college, that professional capital could quadruple his previous salary.

How is this an example of Ong's concept of exible citizenship? Well, a social agent operating in the Iraqi field of engineering with the added professional capital of a certicate from UC Berkeley would have a higher position of status

in Iraq than an agent without that symbolic capital. He could not utilize the symbolic capital of an American degree as effectively if he did not already have professional capital in the field of engineering in Iraq. So despite the terrible paradox of his dislocation by war and his relocation to the country that caused that war, Mustafa may be able to benefit from his situation by capitalizing on prior professional experience and pursuing an opportunistic approach to citizenship in both countries. However, like Farah and Zeinab, these benefits are predicated on enormous violence—not only did Mustafa lose his job, his home, and his country as he knew it, but many of his family members and friends were killed.

Mustafa's story nearly brings us to the end of the refugee path to the US. As I have illustrated in this paper, the refugee trajectory of Iraq's professionals involves three stages: first, displacement, where professional capital is a means to escape the country; second, temporary relocation, where professional capital once again saves the refugees; there, they wait for admittance to the third stage, stable resettlement in the United States, where flexible citizenship provides new opportunities for symbolic capital. Upon reaching this third stage, some choose recertification in their previous profession, as is in Zeinab's case. She is currently improving her English at community college with the hope of once again becoming a lab technician. Others, like Farah, are too shell-shocked and weary to find a job immediately and may take several more years before they find a new dream to follow. Still others, like Mustafa, overcome the paradox of their residence in America by joining the ranks of flexible citizenship and engaging their situation as opportunity for enhanced symbolic capital in their professional social fields.

Yet while Ong's examples of flexible citizens tend to be members of an elite that choose transnational migration, the professional class of Iraqis were *forced* from their homes. Thus, the last component of this three-stage refugee trajectory is the glimmer of hope that most Iraqis have of using their capital and newly acquired flexible citizenship to one day return home, to Iraq, to the houses and gardens, people and jobs, schools and skylines they left behind. Maybe not for "25 or 50 years" as Zeinab told me, but "of course I want to go back, it's my country, my home." However, while infrastructure in Iraq is still lacking and coordinated terror attacks are on the rise, Iraqi refugees are doing what they can to overcome the trauma of their experiences and accept the paradox of their new lives in America.

There is also a second paradox that confronts Iraqi refugees in the US. As Ong explains, Bourdieu's symbolic capital can be limited by symbolic deficit [4]. Many Iraqi professionals in America find that they have an inherent symbolic deficit in the social field of phenotype. No matter how much professional capital they acquire, they cannot avoid racialization based on their skin color, facial features, or accent. Thus, their phenotype deficit hinders the potential of their symbolic capital as they attempt to engage in the American professional field and acclimate to their new lives in this country. Whereas the effects of bombs and tanks in Iraq are only seen on TV and felt in the voices of loved ones still trapped back home, Iraqis in America are instead bombarded with a new

language, new systems, and new people that may have no real sense for the 3-stage trajectory these refugees have experienced and who might proudly and politely ask, “Are you from Mexico?”

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