

Introduction

The United States has been waging war against Iraq since 1991. The intensive six-week bombing campaign of the Gulf War was the first phase of a conflict that has continued for three decades. Throughout the 1990s, American and allied warplanes patrolled the skies of Iraq, regularly bombing the country (Ali 2000). The 2003 American-led invasion was an escalation of an ongoing conflict. The “shock and awe” bombing and subsequent large-scale military occupation of Iraq between 2003 and 2011 as well as the cross-border campaign from 2014 to the present targeting the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and precipitated, directly or indirectly, the displacement of millions of individuals in that country. Between 20 March 2003 and 30 September 2017,¹ more than 172,000 Iraqis left their country and resettled in the United States. This book examines the displacement and resettlement experiences of a cohort of fifteen such individuals, placing their personal narratives within the larger context of the war in their country and daily life as resettled refugees in the United States.

The Iraqis seeking refuge who came to the United States during that nearly fifteen-year period included not only those who arrived through the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) (143,165), but also those who qualified for a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) as a result of their work with the US military or government during the war (21,961), and individuals who were granted asylum (7,189) (Bruno 2019; US Department of State 2019; US Department of Homeland Security 2004, 2014, 2017). Iraqis who entered the United States via the USRAP, SIV, or asylum were eligible for work authorization, permanent residence, and, eventually, citizenship. In short, these populations were granted a status that may lead to full legal membership in the country.

Individuals who arrive in the United States seeking refuge must navigate social and political contexts rife with tensions and contradictions. Iraqis who came to the United States entered a society that had been at war with their country for decades. Moreover, many Iraqis are Arab and Muslim, groups against whom significant numbers of Americans hold negative and prejudiced views. As a result, legal residence or citizenship does not necessarily guarantee substantive possibilities to engage in American society

or politics (Brubaker 2010). Substantive membership and belonging in a society involve significantly more than formal legal rights and are enacted and enhanced through both formal and informal processes (Carens 2013; Crane 2021). Social and political exclusions, whether socially imposed or legally rendered, can be challenged by newcomers as well as native citizens. Belonging is not only granted to newcomers but is claimed and enacted by them (Crane 2021). Contestations to expand the right to belong to those formerly excluded can happen at varied and overlapping sites within society, for example: workplaces, neighborhoods, community organizations, protests, schools, and within and between families (Brubaker 2010).

This book explores these issues through the narratives and experiences of fifteen resettled Iraqis. Scholars have identified a tendency among analysts and policymakers to talk *about* refugees, rather than listen to those individuals' experiences, needs, and desires (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014; Szczepanik 2016). Similarly, Horst (2006) has emphasized the importance of recognizing, (re)valuing, and including the knowledge of refugees in developing strategies and solutions to the challenges created by forced migration. This book addresses a group of Iraqis' interpretations of what it was like to leave their homes in Iraq and to relocate and live in the United States. The core of this text examines those individuals' thoughts and narratives about belonging and participation in American society and politics. As a diverse group of individuals, they did not offer unanimity in their perceptions, interpretations, or recommendations. Nor do the stories of these fifteen people represent an exhaustive picture of "the Iraqi refugee experience" (Crane 2021, 8). However, by drawing their narratives together, this book offers a set of themes and threads about the experience of seeking refuge in the United States. Across interviews, those with whom I spoke elaborated both opportunities and challenges to belonging that they encountered as well as possibilities for democratic participation in formal institutions and informal settings. Their experiences demonstrate that those who resettle as refugees can exercise agency "within the limitations that have been constructed around them" (Inhorn and Volk 2021, 115).

I situate this book in the refugee and forced displacement literature, which is highly inter- and trans-disciplinary. Understanding refugees' experiences requires engaging with questions of war and conflict, global ethics, and democratic belonging and citizenship. As such, I draw methods, concepts, and theories from political science, sociology, and anthropology. This book contributes an empirical exploration of the lived experiences of resettled Iraqis as well as theoretical insights into the complexities of agency and democratic engagement for newcomers in American society.

What follows is also a critical and normative work of interdisciplinary social science. Critical social theorizing presumes that historically situated knowledge can be mobilized for emancipatory aims (Agger 1998). Existing

conditions, social systems, and political institutions are neither necessary nor predetermined. Societies can be otherwise, and the task of critical social science is to locate where opportunities for change exist (Nickel 2012). Building understanding about the conditions of life for newcomers is important. However, it is also important that that knowledge furthers understanding to improve those conditions.

I root this book in a normative commitment to democracy and a political commitment to working to radically democratize American society. This effort entails vastly expanding the substantive opportunities for all members of society to participate in the decisions that affect their lives in their households, workplaces, and political organizations and institutions. It also incorporates a commitment to challenging xenophobia and exclusions as incompatible with a democratic society. A central aim for those concerned with democratizing the United States should be to create a more open society that also welcomes newcomers. Empirically, the book seeks to represent the range of views and experiences shared by interviewees. As other recent studies of resettled Iraqi refugees have found (Campbell 2016; Crane 2021; Inhorn 2018), the individuals I spoke with expressed mixed views of the war in their country and nuanced interpretations of the experience of seeking refuge in the United States. As a result, it is important to note at the outset that not everything interviewees said points in emancipatory directions. In fact, some of the thoughts that my interlocutors shared challenged the political aims of this project. Individual agency can resist power but also reinforce it (Campbell 2016). Nonetheless, I have sought to represent the full range and subtlety of views of those I interviewed.

Finally, this book is also an antiwar work, grounded in a pacifist ethic that maintains that war can never be justified. Such an ethical orientation incorporates both “a negative refusal to participate in organised [*sic*] political violence or offer it legitimacy, and a positive determination to actively build more peaceful and cooperative forms of political life and find ways of resolving contemporary threats and challenges employing alternative, realistic non-violent means” (Jackson 2019, 216).

The American war waged against Iraq since 1991 has always been an imperial war, launched to project and maintain American dominance in the Middle East (Kinzer 2007; Kumar 2012). The war has caused immense and ongoing harm to millions of people. No study of those displaced by that conflict can be complete without directly engaging with American military violence and imperial ambitions to dismantle Iraqi society and rebuild it according to its own aims. There is an urgent need for social scientists to engage more directly with the effects of political and military violence (Blain and Kearns-Blain 2018; Inhorn 2018) and to offer critical interventions that challenge the assumptions of global American military dominance (Espiritu 2014; Nguyen 2012).

Despite a growing interdisciplinary literature exploring displacement and refugees (Cameron 2014), relatively few studies have focused on the experiences of individuals from the Middle East who have been displaced by American wars and resettled in the United States (Shoeb, Weinstein, and Halpern 2007), particularly Iraqis (Black et al. 2013). Dewachi (2017) argues that Iraq is the most understudied country in the Middle East. Several recent monographs have begun to fill this lacuna, using ethnographic methods to explore the experiences of Iraqis who have resettled in the United States, and to examine the moral obligations Americans have to redress the harm they have caused to millions of Iraqis (Campbell 2016; Crane 2021; Inhorn 2018). Much like this book, these works delve into the challenges and difficulties facing Iraqis who now live in a society that is often actively hostile to them as well as the opportunities for resettled individuals to contest negative assumptions and exclusions. Overall, the findings in this book strongly accord with the experiences of resettled Iraqis considered in those earlier works.

Within the literature on resettled Iraqis in the United States, there is a strong focus on individuals' emotional, mental, and physical health and experiences of trauma (Arnetz et al. 2014; Elsouhag et al. 2015; Jen et al. 2015; Kira et al. 2012; Black et al. 2013; Gangamma 2018; Harding and Libal 2012; Hauck et al. 2014; Jamil et al. 2012; LeMaster et al. 2017; Haldane and Nickerson 2010; Nelson et al. 2016; Saadi, Bond, and Percac-Lima 2015; Taylor et al. 2014; Willard, Rabin, and Lawless 2014; Wright, Aldhalimi, et al. 2016; Wright, Dhalimi, et al. 2016; Yako and Biswas 2014; Inhorn 2018). Such inquiries are important and provide much-needed insights. However, a narrow focus on the needs and achievements of refugees locates the problem of displacement within those individuals, rather than in the political and historical conditions that produced their situation (Espiritu 2014).

With several notable exceptions of works that directly confront the violence of American war (Inhorn 2018; Crane 2021; Campbell 2016), much of the extant literature concerning resettled Iraqis cited here either omits or only obliquely describes the American-led war that caused their displacement. By focusing strongly on trauma and simultaneously failing to acknowledge the role the US military and government have had in causing it, such research on Iraqi refugees can reproduce status quo understandings of the United States as a neutral or benevolent country accepting refugees, rather than as a state whose military violence caused that displacement. As Crane argues, the "brute fact" of resettled Iraqis in the United States is a "testimony to the enduring [effects] of *our* war, rather than to the generosity of *our* humanitarian ideals" (2021, xv). This book, particularly its first chapter, similarly directly faces the brutality of the American war waged against Iraq and challenges the assumption and assertion of American humanitarian commitments.

Overall, I make three primary arguments in this book. First, the American war against Iraq is a crime against humanity. The architects of this conflict must be held to account, and Americans must make urgent reparation to the people of Iraq. Second, within the constraints constructed around them (Inhorn and Volk 2021), those who seek refuge can create and enlarge spaces to belong in, and alter, their new host societies through intentional and reciprocal social exchanges with members of the native-born population and other newcomers with diverse backgrounds. Many of those interviewed for this book were engaged in such exchanges. Creating opportunities for this kind of interaction is one potential approach those committed to creating a more open and diverse society can pursue to further those goals. Such work requires intentionality (Benhabib 2006) and, at minimum, a democratic commitment by all parties involved to mutual adjustment (Carens 2013). Third, in addition to interpersonal interaction, collective action undertaken together by newcomers and native-born citizens (leveraging their relatively more secure social and legal positions) is critical to defending and expanding the rights of refugees and other marginalized groups. Collective political engagement is also important if resettled refugees are to build power and contest exclusions.

Contextualizing the Book: Competing Conceptions of American Society

The United States is a settler-colonial society with a transnational genealogy (Dewachi 2017). The interconnected processes of violent dispossession of its territory's Indigenous inhabitants, forced relocation and labor of enslaved Africans, and expansionist European settlement of the continent are foundational to its development as a political, economic, cultural, and social project. The historical and ongoing voluntary and involuntary movements of people within and across the country's borders are a central phenomenon to understanding American society.

Despite its history of dispossession, expulsions, and genocide against the Indigenous inhabitants of what became its territories (Madley 2016), a “grand narrative” persists that frames the United States as an “immigrant country” that has been exceptional—and in some versions unique—in its incorporation of diverse newcomers throughout its history (Alba and Foner 2015). Although there has long been significant scholarship that challenges such claims, offering much more nuanced analyses, many public figures have continued to perpetuate a mythology of American exceptionalism concerning immigrant incorporation (Obama 2010; Kennedy 2006). This narrative persists in popular discourses as well.²

Moreover, as Cristina Beltrán argues “much of US immigration law is a history of racialized assaults on particular segments of the American im-

migrant population” (2020, 25). Nativism, fear, and exclusion of assumed others have long existed alongside the prevailing “America is an immigrant country” narrative. I undertook the research for this book during a period of acute anti-immigrant sentiment and policies emanating from the Republican presidential administration of Donald Trump (2017–2021) and expressed by his supporters. On 26 September 2017, I drove to Upstate New York, ready to conduct my first interview for this research the following day. As I drove north on Interstate-81, I passed another vehicle with a decal that read: “Fuck off, We’re Full,” spelled out in the shape of the continental United States. This incident is illustrative of the sentiments expressed by some segments of American society and members of government during the Trump administration. Echoing the bumper sticker’s sentiment, in April 2019, Trump declared, “our country is full,” to justify reductions in immigrant admissions and increased militarized border enforcement (Irwin and Badger 2019).

Trump campaigned on a nativist, anti-immigrant, and anti-refugee platform (Beinart 2018; Huber 2016) that directed ire at Muslims in particular. In late 2015, for example, as a presidential candidate, Trump called for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” (Johnson 2015). Trump’s campaign and government drew on deeply rooted Orientalist myths about Islam, and those who practice it, as inherently different, dangerous, and irrational (Said 2003), and stoked the fears, prejudices, and nativist sentiments of his supporters.

The Trump administration pursued an anti-refugee agenda both domestically and internationally during its tenure. In addition to drastically reducing refugee resettlement in the United States through the USRAP (Davis 2021), it also cut US funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (Inhorn and Volk 2021), the international agency that supports Palestinians forced to flee their homes by Zionist militias in 1947–48 (Pappe 2006) and later the Israeli military in 1967. Trump’s administration also intentionally created dangerous and traumatizing conditions for children seeking asylum in the United States, separating them from their parents and jailing them in unsafe facilities in efforts to deter asylum-seekers from entering the country (Ainsley 2017; Long and Alonso-Zaldivar 2019; Seville and Rappleye 2018). Moreover, in one of his first acts as president, Trump signed an Executive Order that attempted to ban refugees from seven predominately Muslim countries from entering the United States, including Iraq (K. Liptak 2017). This “travel ban” was initially blocked by legal challenges and later superseded by additional Executive Orders. At the time of this study’s interviews, the travel ban’s final status was uncertain. However, in late 2017 the United States Supreme Court of the United States allowed a revised version to go into effect while legal actions continued (A. Liptak 2017). The Court ultimately

upheld the ban's legality (Totenberg and Montanaro 2018). Although Iraq was removed from the final list of banned countries, the uncertain climate Trump's actions created cruelly affected many of this study's participants' lives and became an important topic of this research.

This book explores such discriminatory and exclusionary rhetoric and policies, but also the (re)actions of many who opposed them. Significant numbers of Americans challenged the “we’re full” ethos, articulating as an alternative what might be called a “refugees welcome” orientation. The work done on behalf of and with newcomers to resist exclusion and xenophobia to create a more open and diverse society is central to the analysis offered in this book as are the ways that participants found to navigate and ameliorate the tensions of living in a society alongside a significant portion of the population that was working to exclude them.

2021 and Beyond: Biden Administration Reversals and Continuities

Trump lost his re-election bid in 2020 and a new presidential administration led by Joe Biden, a Democrat, assumed office in January 2021. Biden had previously served for eight years as vice president under Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama. The Obama administration (2009–2017) took a decidedly different rhetorical approach to immigration than Trump, leaning heavily into the immigrant country narrative and meritocratic discourses of the contributions newcomers make to American society and economy (Obama 2010). Despite its rhetoric, the record of its policies is mixed. That administration pursued stable refugee resettlement policies throughout its tenure. It also took executive actions, such as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, to provide limited protections for immigrants who had arrived as children without legal status. However, that administration simultaneously forcibly deported significantly more people than the previous two presidential administrations had expelled.

It is too soon to definitively assess the Biden administration's approach to migration and resettlement. To date, there have been shifts from the previous administration's approach, but also continuations of its exclusionary policies. Upon Biden's assumption of the presidency, he signed an Executive Order reversing the 2017 travel ban (Meng 2021). His administration has also pledged to return refugee resettlement numbers to pre-Trump levels. However, at the time of writing in spring 2022, full implementation of that reversal is still pending (IRAP 2022). Despite these changes, there are significant continuities between Biden's policies and Trump's. Throughout its first year in office, the Biden administration continued the Trump era use of Title 42, a legal provision used to expel asylum-seekers ostensibly

on public health grounds due to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 (BBC 2021). Moreover, although the total number of migrants and asylum-seekers held in US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) jails has decreased from a peak of 55,000 in August 2019, that number increased again from 15,000 when Biden took office in January 2021 to more than 27,000 in August 2021.

Persistent Exclusionary Policies and Sentiments in American Society and Government

The Trump administration's overtly anti-refugee and anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies are only the most recent manifestation of a long-standing bipartisan policy consensus among the Republican and Democratic parties that has made "life more violent and precarious for immigrants" (Beltrán 2020, 9). The presidential administrations of "Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all supported legislation and policies making migration a more punitive and perilous process" (Beltrán 2020, 9). Moreover, significant percentages of Americans have long expressed exclusionary attitudes. For example, Gallup surveys dating back to 1939 suggest that Americans have largely disapproved of allowing refugees seeking safety from violence to resettle in the United States.³

Negative perceptions of Arabs and Muslims are widespread among members of American society as well. For example, when polled in 2010, only 43 percent of respondents had a favorable view of Arabs and only 35 percent of Americans polled viewed Muslims positively (Zogby International 2010). When polled again in 2017, even fewer respondents had a favorable view of Arabs (35 percent) and Muslims (34 percent) (Zogby Analytics 2017). Muslims and Islam are also perceived the least positively of any religious group or tradition in the United States (Pew 2017a; Sides and Mogahed 2018; Telhami 2015). Moreover, since the beginning of the American war against Iraq in 1991, majorities of Americans—an average of 80 percent across thirty years of surveys—have held unfavorable views of that country (Gallup 2021).

In addition to negative perceptions of Arabs, Muslims, and Iraqis, pluralities of Americans report support for discriminatory policies targeting those individuals. For example, after Trump declared in 2015 that he would require Muslims living in the United States to register with the government (Hillyard 2015), 27 percent of respondents told YouGov that they "strongly" supported and 13 percent "somewhat" supported a national registry of Muslims (YouGov, 20–23 November 2015). In 2017, 37 percent of Americans polled supported law enforcement profiling of Arab and Muslim Americans. Thirty-five percent agreed that the United States should ban immigrants from Middle Eastern countries and 31 percent said Muslim immigrants

should be prohibited from entering the country (Zogby Analytics 2017). While such views are held by a minority, one in three Americans supporting discriminatory policies is still a significant segment of the population.

Moreover, Trump's proposed "Muslim registry" and the 2017 travel ban are only the most recent discriminatory policies targeting Arabs and Muslims living in the United States.⁴ In 2002, for example, the George W. Bush administration created the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), which required male immigrants sixteen years old and older from twenty-five countries, all of which, except North Korea and Eritrea, were Muslim majority, to submit to "special registration" and government tracking. By the end of 2003, 83,000 individuals had voluntarily done so, nearly 13,800 of whom were then placed in deportation proceedings (Kumar 2012). Similarly, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the New York City Police Department (NYPD) devoted significant resources to surveil individuals and infiltrate Arab and Muslim organizations in the years after the 11 September 2001 attacks. Working with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the NYPD spent at least a decade illegally spying on Arabs and Muslims in dozens of mosques, community organizations, restaurants, stores, and schools in New York City, New Jersey, and Connecticut. The program failed to uncover any evidence of criminal activities by any of the people or organizations illegally surveilled (Pilkington 2018; Goldman and Apuzzo 2012). Thus, while Trump certainly imposed discriminatory and violent policies, he did so by building upon similarly cruel precedents set, and platforms constructed, by previous presidential administrations and other agencies of the American government.⁵

The United States has also pursued discriminatory and violent policies directed against Arabs, Muslims, and Iraqis within and beyond its borders. For example, the CIA carried out a global kidnapping program euphemistically called "extraordinary rendition" through which its agents abducted individuals and flew them to secret prisons in fifty-four different countries to be tortured. At least fourteen people were kidnapped and transferred to Egypt during Bill Clinton's presidency (1993–2001) and at minimum 136 individuals were abducted under his successor, George W. Bush (2001–09). The vast majority of the known victims resided or originated in majority Arab and/or Muslim countries, including Iraq (Singh 2013). While Bush's successor, Barack Obama, took limited steps to curtail torture, he refused to hold anyone who participated in these cruel—and illegal—programs accountable.

And although there are differences in the strategies and tactics used by Bush, Obama, Trump, and now Biden, each administration has continued to project American hegemony violently throughout the Middle East and parts of Africa. In addition to its thirty-year war against Iraq, in the years since 2001 the United States has also launched and participated in wars

against six other majority Arab and/or Muslim countries including Afghanistan, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen (Crawford 2018a; Scahill 2015; Guilliard et al. 2015).

As of this writing in spring 2022, except for formally ending the US war in Afghanistan in August 2021, the Biden administration has thus far continued the rest of those military campaigns launched by previous administrations and has proposed further increasing the already colossal US military budget (Greve 2022).⁶ After the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Biden administration ramped up US support for Ukrainian forces, sending funds and weapons, and providing intelligence to strike Russian targets. In May 2022, US Congressman Seth Moulton, a Democrat from Massachusetts, acknowledged that these actions are in service of an American proxy war against Russia (Brands 2022; Democracy Now 2022). American wars have led directly and indirectly to the displacement of millions of people in those countries and beyond. The individuals interviewed for this book were forced to seek safety in the United States as a direct result of continued American militarism and imperial wars.

Speaking with Iraqis

A recounting of the narratives and experiences of fifteen individuals from Iraq whom I interviewed between 27 September 2017 and 27 February 2018 constitute the core of this book. When I began this research, I had been working in the nonprofit sector for ten years, primarily with organizations that serve immigrants and refugees to the United States. In many ways, this research project and my interest in understanding the complex experiences of newcomers to the United States grew out of that work. This book is also informed by a lifelong opposition to war. Marching against the 2003 invasion of Iraq was one of my first political acts. This commitment informs my desire to understand the ways in which American war has harmed so many people in Iraq and beyond.

I began seeking study participants by contacting my professional and personal networks in immigrant and refugee serving nonprofit organizations in the Chicago, Illinois, metropolitan area (colloquially known as Chicagoland), Upstate New York State, and New York City. I used those connections as a foundation on which to locate the first group of individuals who agreed to be interviewed for this research. I then connected with additional interviewees using a snowball method. This initial strategy helped me find four individuals, who in turn connected me with six more interviewees.

As interviews proceeded, I widened my geographical search for participants to other locations to which I could feasibly travel and that have significant resettled refugee populations. With those expanded recruitment

parameters, I contacted additional organizations in Illinois, New York State, Virginia (where I lived at the time of this research), and the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. I was able to connect with individuals in the Shenandoah Valley Region of Virginia, and the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. To ensure the confidentiality of interviewees, I refer to broad geographic regions and large metropolitan areas rather than identify exactly where they live.

Contacting potential interviewees through my existing personal and professional contacts proved significantly more successful than cold-calling immigrant or refugee service organizations. As one interviewee told me, it is unlikely that he would have agreed to an interview if his friend, with whom I had already spoken, had not connected us. I identified only two interviewee possibilities through cold contacts, each of whom connected me with an additional individual. Finally, I secured one interview through a serendipitous personal connection. Over the course of five months, I traveled to and conducted interviews in Chicagoland, Upstate New York, New York City, the Shenandoah Valley Region of Virginia, and the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. I refer to interviewees by pseudonyms throughout this book. I also assigned pseudonyms to all friends, family members, and in some cases obscured other details about topics we discussed to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

I spoke with seven individuals who arrived in the United States via the United States Refugee Assistance Program, five SIV recipients, two people who claimed asylum, and one young man who had refugee status in Syria, but journeyed to the United States on a student visa. Each one of these people, and in many cases their families, left their country after the 2003 US-led invasion and came to the United States seeking safety. Although this book frames the American violence against Iraq as one long conflict with multiple phases that began in 1991, when I began planning for this research project, I conceived of the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 American-led invasion as two separate conflicts. It is for that reason that I recruited participants who left Iraq after the 2003 invasion, understanding this population as distinct from Iraqis who left the country between 1991 and 2003.

Iraq is a multicultural and diverse society. The modern Iraqi state was created by the British Empire after World War I by stitching together three former Ottoman provinces in which an Arabic-speaking majority (75–80 percent of the population) lives alongside a Kurdish-speaking minority (15–20 percent). In addition to the Arabic-Kurdish ethnolinguistic cleavage, Iraq's society can be broadly divided into adherents of one of the two major sects in Islam: Sunni or Shi'a. The majority of Muslims worldwide is Sunni, however, Sunni Muslims only make up approximately 15 to 20 percent of Iraq's Muslims, while Shi'a are the majority. As most Kurds are Sunni, Marr and al-Marashi (2017) argue that Iraq can broadly be understood as

segmented into three major groups: Arab Shi'a, Arab Sunnis, and Kurds. There are also much smaller numbers of Iraqi Christians, Yazidi, and Jews.

Because of Iraq's long history and diverse population, the idea of an Iraqi nation and identity is contested (Marr and al-Marashi 2017). Moreover, terminology and concepts such as "the Middle East" are fraught with Orientalist and imperialist histories (Campbell 2016). While remaining aware of these difficulties, I make use of such concepts in this book in large part because they were understood by the individuals with whom I spoke and because interviewees themselves used such terms.

I spoke with four women and eleven men ranging in age from twenty-seven to fifty-seven at the time of their interview. Those I interviewed came from multiple cities in Iraq. All identified themselves as either Muslim or non-religious, but Muslim by background. Only a few of the individuals I spoke with identified themselves as either Shi'a or Sunni. Several characterized themselves as of mixed ethnolinguistic background (Arabic and Kurdish) or religious background (Sunni and Shi'a). I conducted interviews in English with individuals who felt comfortable expressing themselves in that language. The quotations drawn from those interviews that appear in this book have been edited lightly for clarity and readability. However, I sought to minimize edits to maintain and reflect everyone's words as closely as possible.

Who Is a Refugee?

Each of those with whom I spoke identified themselves as either a refugee or former refugee. Yet, there is significant disagreement among scholars, legal experts, and practitioners concerning how to define that term. A number of overlapping and contrasting definitions exist in scholarship, domestic and international law, and popular understanding (Lister 2013; Shacknove 1985; Haddad 2008; Bakewell 2008).⁷ Volk and Inhorn argue that the central concepts scholars use to understand displacement: refuge, refugee, internally displaced persons, and asylum-seeker have "frayed edges" (2021, 10). Indeed, as Cameron (2014) has argued, the complexity of refuge situations and experiences makes building a grand or meta-theory of "refugeeness" difficult.

For this analysis, I distinguish between refugee—and related concepts such as refuge, asylum, asylum-seeker, and resettlement—as analytical categories and as policy or legal categories (Bakewell 2008). I primarily use these concepts as analytical categories throughout this book, particularly refugee. I employed an expansive definition of refugee as an individual who has left their home due to insecurity and sought safety elsewhere, irrespective of legal, visa, or immigration status.

Despite the multiple programs and paths through which participants arrived in the United States, each decided to leave their country and seek safety abroad. As explored in more detail in later chapters, the status each individual

sought or achieved was a result of assessing their situation and seeking out whatever means might bring safety. The ongoing violence and instability of the American war against Iraq prompted each to leave their homes and seek security and better conditions elsewhere. Therefore, irrespective of their legal categorization—or lack of such status—by state agencies or international institutions, the individuals who participated in this study have experienced being refugees. Likewise, although the choice to remain permanently was not entirely in their control for some of the individuals with whom I spoke, they had all resettled in the United States, and almost all sought to stay in the country and pursue education, work, and (re)establish their lives.

Introducing Research Participants

Throughout this book, I organize participants' experiences around key themes. As a result, the narratives, interpretations, and opinions of all fifteen interviewees are interwoven throughout the chapters of this book. Here I provide short introductions to each of the individuals with whom I spoke and indicate who was connected to whom in each of the geographic locations where interviews took place. I also provide a summary table of demographic information at the end of this section.

Upstate New York

Walid, 39, was born in Karbala, a city two hours south of Iraq's capital, Baghdad. Before leaving Iraq, Walid worked as a middle school teacher and owned a business. Walid's father was killed by the Ba'ath regime, and his mother, brother, and a sister chose to remain in Iraq. Another sister sought refuge in Germany. He and his family left Iraq in 2006, first seeking refuge in neighboring Syria. They stayed in Syria until 2008, when they applied for resettlement in the United States. He and his family resettled in Upstate New York. Walid is active in his community, working with, founding, and leading various nonprofit initiatives supporting other refugees and immigrants in the area.

Marwa, 48, is from Baghdad. She is a friend and colleague of Walid. Marwa left Iraq in 2006 and lived in Egypt for three years. She arrived in the United States in 2009 through the USRAP with her three children. Her husband joined them the following year. Marwa settled in Upstate New York with the help of another Iraqi family her husband knew. She has a degree in physics and worked as a math and physics teacher for eleven years in Iraq. After resettling, she studied at a local college to train as an optician. When we spoke, she had left optometry and was working as a case manager at the same organization as Walid.

Mohammed, 38, volunteers with Walid and Marwa for a community organization assisting resettled refugees in Upstate New York. He is from Karbala originally, where his mother and siblings still live. Mohammed sought refuge in Syria for four years before coming to the United States. He arrived in the United States through the USRAP in 2011. He and his wife and fourteen-year-old daughter resettled in Upstate New York because his friend Walid was already there. Both Mohammed and his wife work as case managers for a social service organization in the area.

Tariq, 33, lives in Upstate New York with his wife and children. He is originally from the Babylon Province in central Iraq. He identified himself as a Shi'ite Muslim. After the 2003 invasion, Tariq joined with the US Marines as a translator. He later faced danger because of this work with the United States and decided to apply for the SIV program. He received his visa and resettled in the United States in 2012. Tariq has a degree in physics from Iraq and was working as a sales representative at an automobile dealership in Upstate New York at the time of our interview. He was also enrolled in an MBA program at a local university.

New York City

Nada, 57, resettled in the United States in 2013. She was the last member of her family to leave Iraq. First her daughter and her daughter's husband left Iraq for the United States, then her son. After that, her husband and other children came to the United States. Finally, her documents were ready, and she left Iraq for New York City. Nada was eligible for an SIV because her husband worked for an American company in Baghdad and faced threats as a result. Her brother-in-law, who had come to the United States twenty-five years earlier, sponsored Nada and her family to come. When we spoke, Nada was taking English as a second language (ESL) classes at a local college. Nada and her husband had worked as engineers in Iraq. When she resettled in New York, she began volunteering at a local nonprofit assisting other immigrants and refugees and, at the time of our interview, worked as a teacher at the organization. Nada introduced me to Sarah.

Sarah, 39, is from Baghdad. After leaving Iraq in 2005, she lived in Syria for eight years with her brother and sisters. From Syria, her brother went to Germany and she and her sisters resettled in the United States in 2013. They first arrived in Arizona, where they lived for three years. Sarah and one of her sisters moved to New York City while her other sister and her four children stayed in Arizona. At the time of our interview, Sarah had just started taking English classes at a local college to improve her communication.

Ali, 37, was born in Iraq but spent some of his childhood in the United States. His father worked for the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Saddam Hussein. He and his family lived for a time in Virginia in the 1980s.

Ali identified himself as a Sunni Muslim. He left Iraq in 2006 and spent time in Jordan, Syria, and Egypt before resettling in the United States through the SIV program in 2012. He worked as a dishwasher when he arrived before finding a job at an Arab American serving nonprofit. He lives with his wife, two children, and parents. His daughter was born in Damascus and his son in New York City. Ali's sister lives in the New York area as well, and at the time of our interview, he was working to complete his brother's immigration process to bring him to the United States. Ali introduced me to Abdullah.

Abdullah, 28, arrived in New York City in 2010. An outlier among those interviewed for this research, he came to the United States on a student visa. Abdullah had sought refuge in Syria after leaving Iraq. While there, he heard about an American nongovernmental organization that offered scholarships to study in the United States. He applied twice to this program and, after the second attempt, received funding to travel to New York City and study civil engineering at a local university. When we spoke, Abdullah was working for a company in the area on an Optional Practical Training immigration status and hoping to receive a Green Card, which would allow him to stay longer in the United States and work without sponsorship.

Chicagoland

Ahmed, 34, grew up in Baghdad. He first arrived in the United States in 2015 but went back to Iraq after three months. He then returned to the United States in 2016 with the intention of staying permanently. He and his daughter arrived in Chicago through the SIV program. At the time we spoke, he had lived in the United States for approximately one year and was working for a nonprofit organization that serves immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers in the Chicagoland area. Ahmed connected me with both Hashim and Wissam.

Hashim, 34, was born and raised in Baghdad. He and Ahmed attended high school together and remained friends. In 2006, he moved to Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, in the north of the country to escape the violence in Baghdad. While in Erbil, Hashim worked with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This work made him eligible for a Special Immigrant Visa. In 2014, he received an SIV, and he and his wife left Iraq for the United States. Hashim resettled in Chicago, Illinois, and some of his wife's family followed thereafter. His parents remained in Baghdad. Two of his brothers resettled in Texas. At the time of our interview, Hashim worked for a university hospital system, serving as a bilingual point of contact for international medical patients who traveled to the United States for care.

Wissam, 35, is originally from Sulaymaniyah, in the Kurdish region of Iraq. He described his background as mixed, with Kurdish and Turkman

grandparents, and an Arab mother. He lived in Baghdad before leaving the country. Wissam worked with the US government after the 2003 invasion. In 2005, he went to Jordan to study at an American university program. In 2009, he traveled to the United States for his graduation ceremony. While he was in the country, he and his parents claimed asylum, fearing his work with the United States put his family at risk. After Wissam claimed asylum, his wife left Iraq for Jordan, where she applied for refugee resettlement in the United States. Wissam's asylum claim was approved in 2012. Wissam is an entrepreneur. When we spoke in 2017, he was working to launch a food service and restaurant business.

Shenandoah Valley Region of Virginia

Omar, 42, is from Basra. He described himself as Sunni. He left Iraq for Lebanon in 2006 and stayed there for two years. Deciding he could not return to Iraq or stay in Lebanon, he applied for resettlement through the USRAP, and he and his wife and first child arrived in the United States in 2008. He now lives in the Shenandoah Valley Region with his wife and four kids. Omar is involved with, and has founded, multiple initiatives to support refugees and immigrants in the area. Working with other members of the local immigrant and refugee communities he has created ESL classes, translated government documents, and held civic engagement activities. Omar connected me with Nora.

Nora, 27, was born in Yemen while her father was working there. She described her background as both Kurdish and Arab with family members who are both Sunni and Shi'a. Nora has four brothers and four sisters. Two of her brothers live in Baghdad, one lives in Jordan, one in Ohio. Three of her sisters live in Iraq, one lives in Fairfax, Virginia. Nora is a lawyer who practiced family law before leaving Iraq. In what became her last case, she represented the wife of a militia leader. The militia threatened Nora's life to scare her away from the case. In 2014, Nora and her parents received visas to visit her brother and his children who live in Ohio. While in the United States, Nora decided to seek asylum due to the ongoing threat posed by her client's husband. At the time of our interview, Nora was completing a graduate degree, working, and volunteering with Omar and in several other capacities in the area.

Washington, DC, Metropolitan Area

Kasim, 45, originally from Baghdad, left Iraq for Jordan in 2006. He stayed in Jordan for a year before coming to the United States as a refugee. Kasim briefly lived with a sponsor in Virginia before moving to the DC area. He has a background in architecture and worked in that field when he first

arrived in the United States. When we spoke, Kasim was working for a DC-based NGO with a focus on peacebuilding and addressing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for those affected by war. He lives with his wife and three children. His first child was born in Jordan and his two younger children were born in the United States. Unique among those interviewed in this book, Kasim is a Trump supporter, a topic we spoke at length about. Kasim connected me with Zaid.

Zaid, 35, comes from a mixed Sunni/Shi'ite family. He completed his medical training in Baghdad and worked as a doctor in Iraq. In 2007, he left the country for Jordan. He first applied for visas to go to the United Kingdom, where his older brother lives. Zaid was unable to secure a visa to the UK, so he applied for refugee status and resettlement in the United States. He arrived in the DC area in 2010. He wanted to work as a doctor but did not have the time or resources to complete the lengthy and expensive process of having his medical credentials accredited in the United States. When we spoke, he was working at an embassy in the medical attaché office. His work involves supporting nationals of the embassy's country who come to the United States for medical treatment.

Organizing Displacement and Resettlement Narratives around Belonging, Democratic Membership, and Participation

This book examines the experiences of individuals who have left their homes as refugees and resettled in the United States. Such experiences are complex and entail navigating entrance into a new society and processes of engaging with that society as a newcomer. I have sought to conceptualize those processes along three key axes: belonging, democratic membership, and participation in democratic processes.

Each of these ideas is, in turn, embedded in the concept of democracy. Democracy is both an empirical practice and a normative set of commitments. For this book, I use democracy to denote the activities and institutions that give members of a society not only legal standing, but also substantive opportunities to engage in the processes of deciding the rules and laws that govern their lives (Benhabib 2006; Pateman 1970, 2012). Therefore, participation in such processes at every level (in the home, in the workplace, and in public institutions, for example voting in elections or joining a school board) is essential to the functioning of a democratic society. Moreover, in a democratic society, members have a right to public provision of the individual and collective material resources needed to live full and meaningful lives, and a parallel right to engage in decision-making concerning how those resources are produced and distributed (Pateman 2012; Wolff 2012).

Table 0.1. Summary interviewee demographics

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Program	Arrival	Status	Location	Interview Date
Walid	M	39	USRAP	2008	Citizen	Upstate NY	9/27/2017
Hashim	M	34	SIV	2014	Resident	Chicagoland	10/1/2017
Ahmed	M	34	SIV	2016	Resident	Chicagoland	10/2/2017
Wissam	M	35	Asylum	2009	Resident	Chicagoland	10/22/2017
Nada	F	57	SIV	2013	Resident	NYC	11/1/2017
Tariq	M	33	SIV	2012	Resident	Upstate NY	11/2/2017
Mohammed	M	38	USRAP	2011	Citizen	Upstate NY	11/2/2017
Marwa	F	48	USRAP	2009	Citizen	Upstate NY	11/25/2017
Sarah	F	39	USRAP	2013	Resident	NYC	11/30/2017
Omar	M	42	USRAP	2008	Citizen	Shenandoah Valley Region	12/14/2017
Ali	M	37	SIV	2012	Resident	NYC	1/14/2018
Abdullah	M	28	OPT	2010	Resident	NYC	1/14/2018
Nora	F	27	Asylum (Pending)	2014	Resident	Shenandoah Valley Region	2/6/2018
Kasim	M	45	USRAP	2007	Citizen	Washington, DC, Metro	2/27/2018
Zaid	M	35	USRAP	2010	Citizen	Washington, DC, Metro	2/27/2018

Because everyone who lives in a given society is subjected to decisions and structures that affect their lives each of those individuals *ought* to have an equal right to participate in those decision-making processes and structures, regardless of their formal legal status.

This book is concerned with democratizing democracy (Pateman 2012), that is to say, identifying opportunities to increase participation in existing institutions and creating new modes and sites for members to participate in making the decisions that affect their lives. A robust democratic society

incorporates such structures and opportunities at every level, and in the multiple sites in which people live, work, and spend their time. The forms of participation in a democratic society are manifold and include both formal and informal structures and processes as well as deliberative engagements and agonistic struggles among its members.

With this in mind, I have adopted a normative orientation that “democracies require porous borders” (Benhabib 2006, 68). That is, there must be a way for “outsiders” to cross the boundaries of a democratic society, figuratively and literally. This access requires ongoing contestations to determine who has a right and standing to participate, and how those formerly excluded can become full members of a social and political community should they so choose. The politics of membership can play out at various sites and scales within society, including the family, neighborhood, city, nation, and beyond (Brubaker 2010).

As noted above, belonging to a political community involves much more than legal status and formal rights (Carens 2013). Belonging requires not only a right to reside in a particular place but also a right to act (Crane 2021). There is a distinction between belonging *to* a nation-state (or other sociopolitical community) and belonging *in* a nation-state (Brubaker 2010). The former typically refers to citizenship, a legal status conferring formal rights to political membership. The latter can be understood as the informal possibilities for individuals to exercise their rights substantively and to obtain acceptance as full members of the society (Brubaker 2010), should they choose to seek it. As the majority of those interviewed for this book either had US citizenship at the time of interview or had a path to gaining it, this analysis focused on belonging *in* the United States. Belonging understood this way also incorporates the reciprocal feelings of acceptance, and the processes and possibilities for interviewees to identify and build relationships with members and institutions of American society at multiple levels. As a minimum normative standard, developing a robustly democratic society requires mutual adjustment among existing members and newcomers (Carens 2013), in which all parties are willing to accept some changes to their lives and practices as a result of living in that society together.

Just as there can be tensions between formal legal status granting belonging to a state and the informal substantive experience of belonging in a nation-state, there is also tension in the substantive exercise of democratic membership. A normative presupposition of democracy is that members of a democratic community have opportunities to engage in making the decisions that affect their lives. However, there has never been a perfect overlap between those governed by the rules and laws in societies and those recognized as legitimate members of those communities. Every political community, democratic or otherwise, has disenfranchised some of its members (Benhabib 2006). Therefore, I have sought to explore the barriers, again

primarily informal, to the substantive exercise of democratic membership for resettled Iraqis.

Guiding Questions

The questions that guided this project included:

- In what ways do resettled Iraqis see themselves as current or future members of a social and political community in the United States?
- What challenges and barriers existed to their gaining and exercising membership?
- Did legal residence and/or a path to citizenship translate into substantive opportunities to engage with and influence the culture, policies, and laws that affected their lives?
- In what ways were resettled Iraqis engaged in processes of democratic (re)negotiations or (re)interpretations in the United States?

Chapter Organization

This book, organized into four chapters, explores these questions through participants' observations, narratives, and experiences. Chapter 1 focuses on the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, the social, economic, and political breakdown that it precipitated in that country, and the decisions study participants made to leave their homes and resettle in the United States as a result. It details the violence unleashed by the occupation—particularly that committed by the American military and its allies—and traces the connections between the erosion of interviewees' personal safety and their decisions to seek refuge abroad.

Chapter 2 delves into study participants' assessments of postresettlement opportunities for belonging in American society and analyzes their perceptions of how negative media and government discourses and policies concerning refugees, Arabs, and Muslims shaped and constrained their life experiences. This chapter explores how those interviewed articulated the importance of finding opportunities to engage in personal and cultural exchange with friends, neighbors, and colleagues to create a more open and diverse society. I argue that such sustained efforts, while potentially constrained, can be important factors in challenging discriminatory treatment and policies and mitigating persistent negative attitudes toward these groups held by a share of America's citizens.

Chapter 3 describes study participants' understandings of democratic membership, formal and informal, in the United States. It considers interviewees' critiques of American political institutions and problematizes the possibilities for democratic governance in the United States. It then inves-

tigates four key requirements to democratic participation that interviewees identified: sufficient time to engage in democratic processes and activities; public provision of resources; adequate information to make informed decisions and participate productively; and substantive protections of rights and safety to attenuate suspicion of government officials and institutions, in part resulting from living under authoritarian rule in Iraq.

Chapter 4 elaborates on multiple sites and modes of participation in which interviewees engaged and that they identified as desired future activities. The three primary sites and modes were engaging in dialogue, debate, and discussion concerning the decisions, policies, and laws that affect their lives; volunteering with—and, in some cases, founding—community and nonprofit organizations focused on various types of (typically) refugee and immigration-related activities; and activism and protest in response to the Trump 2017 travel ban. I argue that participants’ experiences demonstrate that social and political mobilization and public demonstration of norms of welcoming and diversity, and against xenophobia, undertaken jointly by resettled refugees and native-born Americans can protect and enlarge spaces for belonging and democratic participation for refugees and other groups targeted by discriminatory politics and policies.

The concluding chapter underscores the importance of deliberate, daily interactions, exchange, and organizing among newcomers and native-born Americans to expand spaces for resettled refugees to engage in, and, potentially, reconstitute, American society. Through these multifaceted social and political processes, newcomers can contest exclusions and fictive insider/outsider boundaries. It also considers how such processes might catalyze emerging and new practices of cosmopolitan democracy. The book closes by reiterating the key implications for policy and activism that the resettled Iraqis’ experiences explored here illuminate, including the need to generate alternatives to American military violence; create and enlarge spaces for diversity, difference, and exchange; understand the interconnected relationships between barriers and requirements for democratic participation; and engage in struggles for justice in and across multiple sites and modes of action with varied strategies and tactics.

Notes

1. This date coincides with the end of US Federal Government fiscal year 2017 and the beginning of interviews conducted for this research.
2. See long-time National Public Radio (NPR) host Tom Gjelten’s *A Nation of Nations: A Great American Immigration Story* for a recent example of work that perpetuates the discourse that the United States has “demonstrate[d] the exceptionalism it has long claimed for itself” through “enlightened” immigration policies (2015, 344).

3. In only one of eight cases polled, the 1999 proposed resettlement of several hundred individuals from Kosovo, did a clear majority of Americans support resettlement (66 percent). In 2018, a slight majority (51 percent) indicated support for accepting several thousand Central American individuals fleeing their countries. Only minorities approved in all other cases polled: Syrians in 2015 (37 percent), Vietnamese in 1979 (32 percent), Hungarians in 1958 (33 percent), Europeans including Jews in 1946 (16 percent) and 1947 (24 percent), and German children in 1939 (26 percent) (J. McCarthy 2018).
4. Anti-Arab and anti-Muslim rhetoric propagated by American political leaders dates back as far as the late eighteenth century, when conflict broke out between the newly established United States government and the Barbary states encompassing present-day Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia (Beydoun 2013).
5. Importantly as well, there is a long history of violent and exclusionary US government policies targeting (im)migrants. For example, the United States expelled more than one million Mexican immigrants in the 1930s, 60 percent of whom were American citizens (Valenciana and Ordoñez-Jasis 2012).
6. Negotiated under Trump and carried out under Biden, in August 2021, the United States officially ended its twenty-year war against Afghanistan and evacuated its remaining troops from the country. However, the repeated declarations of war's end in Iraq, and continuing bombing and US special forces campaigns around the world, provide significant reason to assume that this decades-long war will not end, but rather morph into a continued military engagement waged by clandestine forces, private mercenaries, and aerial bombardment by drones and warplanes.
7. For example, most Palestinian refugees—one of the world's largest displaced populations—are excluded from the (limited) protections afforded by the international legal regime established by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the programs run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that assist displaced persons.