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The US Domestic Front: Politics over Displaced Iraqis

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INTRODUCTION

Wars incur consequences of a complex nature, including ones on the domestic front. When policies to start or end a war are examined, however, more attention is paid to military, political, and financial consequences while the human elements tend to be underappreciated. In looking at wars the United States has initiated, little attention has been paid to the human costs incurred by the local people involved in the war and America's responsibility toward the people displaced by wars it has waged.

An interesting contrast to such an absence of interest in the human cost on the battlefield is the humanitarianism American society emphasizes as a principle. In a 2011 US opinion poll, while 65 percent supported immigrants entering the United States to escape poverty, 74 percent welcomed refugees escaping from armed conflict.¹ When we move from the general principle to specifics, though, the welcoming of refugees from US wars often runs into confrontation over their resettlement, especially when the new people are identified as a threat to the existing community.

For example, an Iraqi immigrant woman was beaten to death in El Cajon, California, which is the second largest Iraqi community in the United States

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after Detroit. In this alleged hate crime, a note was left saying, “This is my country. Go back to yours, terrorist.”² The way American society identifies Iraqis and other Middle Easterners, or to a similar degree, South Asians, with terrorists symbolizes the complex nature of the “war on terror” in Iraq and Afghanistan. The prolonged war has been justified by the need to keep terrorists away from the shores of the United States.³ Such a characterization has turned the victims of the humanitarian crisis caused by the war into security threats, thus classifying them as unwelcome in the United States.

This article examines the US domestic front of the invasion and occupation of Iraq by looking at the people displaced as a result of American policies. Let us first give an overview of the development of US refugee policy and then examine US responses to the humanitarian cost incurred by Iraqis affected by the war. Let us finally comment on the nuanced responses of US host communities toward newly arrived Iraqi refugees. This will shed light on the subordinating structure imposed on the Iraqi people, who must absorb the consequences of the American war both in Iraq and in the United States.

I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF US REFUGEE POLICY

A. Humanitarian Ideals and Political Reality

The United States enacted its first refugee act as late as 1980, even though its history has been closely tied with people who, by the current definition, can be categorized as “refugees.” Even after the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was adopted in 1951, the United States remained outside the Convention until it accepted the Convention’s Protocol in 1968. Some argue that it was so obvious that the United States stood for the humanitarian cause that it did not recognize the necessity to enact a specific law on refugees.⁴

The history of US admission of refugees underscores this point, and humanitarianism has become a part of the national identity. Sen. Edward (Ted) Kennedy expressed it in 1980: “America has been a haven for the world’s homeless since the first colonists reached these shores four centuries ago. Since then, the American people have a record of accomplishment in offering a helping hand to refugees that is unsurpassed by any other nation.”⁵

The United States did not distinguish refugees from immigrants in general, and it did not even try to restrict immigration until the late nineteenth century. After immigration laws were enacted, not having a specific law for refugees sometimes caused practical problems for their settlement or provided leeway for arbitrary treatment of refugees. The Immigration Act of

1924, for example, set permanent national origin quotas for immigrants. When Jews fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s, the US gate was closed once the German quota was reached, irrespective of the reason why the refugees were applying for admission. It has been argued that the existing legal framework was used as an excuse for restricting Jewish immigration partly because of the economic situation under the Great Depression and partly because of tacit anti-Semitism in American society.⁶

The political upheaval of the early Cold War period in Europe led the United States to use an ad hoc presidential order and a series of laws as the legal basis for accepting refugees in excess of the existing national quotas in the absence of a specific law for refugees. For example, the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 accepted 410,000 displaced persons or refugees, as defined by the UN's International Refugee Organization, from such countries as Poland, Germany, and the Soviet Union. This act was followed by the Refugee Relief Act of 1953, which accepted 190,000 from Europe and China. These and subsequent acts targeting specific populations clearly show that US policies toward refugee admissions were more conscious of the Cold War confrontation, and to a certain degree the Palestinian political situation, than humanitarian need.⁷

The political nature of US refugee acceptance, as opposed to the rhetorical talk of humanitarianism, was observed in the language of the Immigration Act of 1965. While the act abolished the national origin quotas, the prioritized slot for refugees was set at 6 percent of the overall immigration limit and it restricted the use of term "refugees" to cover those who were from Communist or Communist-ruled countries and from the Middle East. These specific ideological and geographical conditions were not removed when the United States acceded to the 1968 UN Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and thus refugees from other areas continued to face practical problems entering the United States.

B. A War-Driven Refugee Act

It was an unexpected development when South Vietnamese people, who were neither from a Communist country nor from the Middle East, and thus not included in the US category of refugees, sought refuge in the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Faced with the rapidly growing humanitarian disaster, President Gerald Ford expressed American moral responsibility to respond in the following way:

Tens of thousands of South Vietnamese employees of the United States

Government, of news agencies, of contractors and businesses for many years whose lives with their dependents are in grave peril. There are tens of thousands of other South Vietnamese intellectuals, professors, teachers, editors and opinion leaders who have supported the South Vietnamese cause and the alliance with the United States to whom we have a profound obligation. . . . Fundamental decency requires that we do everything in our power to ease the misery and the pain of the monumental human crisis which has befallen the people of Vietnam. . . . I hereby pledge in the name of the American people that the United States will make a maximum humanitarian effort to help care for and feed these hopeless victims.⁸

US military forces and bases were utilized to transport and house large numbers of South Vietnamese refugees, who were finally accepted into the United States. Parole given by the US Attorney General, which was intended to be applied on a case-by-case basis, was utilized to admit 150,000 South Vietnamese to the United States.⁹ This situation pushed Congress to enact a permanent refugee act, rather than extending the patchwork of legislations. Ironically, the Refugee Act of 1980 was driven by the consequence of the Vietnam War, which the United States had initiated years before.

Emphasizing humanitarianism, the Refugee Act aimed at depoliticizing the policy of refugee admissions and increased the ceiling up to 50,000 annually. The act, however, did not necessarily prioritize humanitarian concern but admitted refugees under the same conditions as other immigrants. Thus among those who were recognized as refugees, some were not allowed to enter the United States if they did not meet these conditions. For example, thousands of Cambodian refugees with previous connection to the Khmer Rouge were regarded as “persecutors” and were thus ineligible for admission to the United States, despite their severe humanitarian situation.¹⁰

Roger Winter, director of the US Committee for Refugees, reflected on US policy toward South Vietnamese and stated, “I don’t know of another situation in history where a nation has taken in such a large number of people from a distant culture for whom it felt a dramatic responsibility.”¹¹ But such sincere humanitarianism that American society extended to Vietnamese refugees can be looked at from another perspective. Reviewing the whole process of the Vietnam War, Yen Le Espiritu, herself a Vietnamese refugee to the United States, points out that the “hyper-visibility” of refugees fleeing Vietnam after 1975 and the “un-visibility” of internal refugees

displaced by American brutality throughout the war have “enable[d] the United States to represent itself as a refuge-providing rather than a refugee-producing nation.”¹²

Voluntary organizations assisting refugee resettlement share the principle that accepting refugees represents humanitarianism, and whether or not the United States is morally responsible for the war itself makes no difference in their treatment.¹³ As the following Iraqi refugee case shows, however, humanitarianism is sometimes forced to take a backseat, while political considerations have dominated the process of decision making during the initial stage of Iraqi-refugee acceptance.

II. CHARACTERIZATION OF THE IRAQ WAR AND INVISIBLE HUMAN DISASTER

A. Invisible Iraqi Refugees

As opposed to the failed war in Vietnam, and the resulting vast number of refugees for whom President Ford felt moral responsibility, the Iraq War was considered to have been won from the outset. The George W. Bush administration believed that international norms against tyranny, terrorism, or weapons of mass destruction stood firmly behind US policy to invade Iraq. What is more, a large portion of the American people had been supportive of removing Saddam Hussein from power for over a decade, which was reinforced by public reaction against the loss caused by 9/11.¹⁴ A successful war, it was expected, would not lead to another outbreak of refugees or necessitate replacing the negative image of the war with the positive humanitarian story of refugee resettlement. On the contrary, it was expected that repatriating refugees would join those who stayed inside of Iraq to extend welcome to American liberating forces.

In fact, refugees of the Iraq War, along with those from the earlier Gulf War repatriated Iraq right after the fall of the Hussein regime.¹⁵ However, the occupation of Iraq by US forces was not welcomed as liberating but was regarded as another kind of oppression. The security situation of Iraq started to deteriorate in 2005, and especially after the bombing of the Shia Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra in February 2006. Sectarian violence pushed up the number of internally displaced people as well as refugees, while increasing the number of US casualties.

It is reported that 1.4–1.7 million refugees fled from Iraq to Syria, 550,000–810,000 to Jordan, and 200,000 to other places. In addition to 1.2 million internally displaced by the previous Gulf War, 20,000 became displaced between 2003 and 2005, and 800,000 after February 2006.¹⁶

The bipartisan Iraq Study Group was set up by Congress to address this deteriorating situation; it recommended troop withdrawal and diplomacy in its December 2006 report. President Bush, however, decided to increase, rather than decrease, the level of troops deployed to Iraq, the so-called Surge. The incoming Congress, now with a Democratic Party majority, initiated a series of hearings to examine the situation in Iraq starting January 2007.

The occupation of Iraq required the hiring of a large number of Iraqi people by the US government to serve as interpreters/translators assisting the occupation, since US occupation force lacked the ability to communicate with local people due to the poor advanced planning. A larger number of Iraqis were contracted with US governmental agencies for other work. As hatred against US occupying forces intensified, these employees, known as “locally engaged staff” (LES) corps, increasingly became the targets of anti-American violence. LES corps enabled US forces to communicate with local people not only in terms of language but also culturally. In other words, US troops could not fulfill their mission without the support of LES corps. Reportedly, a cable from Baghdad was already telling of the danger LES corps was faced with in November 2005: “Insurgents’ intimidation campaign has touched our LES corps personally: two of our LES employees have been gunned down in execution-style murders, and two others barely escaped a similar fate in August.”¹⁷

Despite such warnings, the congressional hearings of early 2007 found that the administration lacked knowledge about the situation of LES corps and had not implemented any measures to protect their security. Journalist George Packer described how such Iraqi cooperators were exposed to threats to their lives but continued to be underprotected by the US government.¹⁸ They were even mistrusted by their American colleagues under the aggregate category of “Iraqis” in that they might be connected with insurgent Iraqis. Congressional hearings thus focused on the fate of these Iraqi cooperators and how government policies were failing these people. Rep. Gary Ackerman of New York stated:

As it stands, this refugee crisis will mark our national honor with an indelible stain. Whether you support the President’s plan or believe we need to bring our troops home, America has a clear moral obligation to the millions of Iraqis who have become refugees because of our invasion, however well intentioned, but even more so and especially to the thousands of Iraqis who because of their allegiance to us have no

future in their own country. The people who put their lives and lives of their families on the line by assisting the United States Government, our armed forces and our coalition partners, must not be abandoned in their hour of need.¹⁹

During fiscal years 2002 to 2007, the annual worldwide refugee ceiling of the United States was set at 70,000 with 3,000 to 15,000 slots allocated to the Near East/South Asia region, which includes Iraq. Even with the accelerating humanitarian crisis, Iraqi refugees admitted to the United States remained far below the ceiling, standing at 198 in FY 2005 and 202 in FY 2006. It is said that the small numbers were mostly due to technical difficulties, such as bad local security or other conditions that prohibited officials from interviewing and processing refugee applications.²⁰

One of the witnesses testifying at the hearings criticized the US government's formalistic treatment of the Iraqi situation, saying, "Obviously, the international community is trying to help with that, but are we aware of this, even though we're involved in the Iraq war? . . . I as an American, for example, feel a sense of responsibility towards the refugees that are coming out of Iraq, given our role in the war."²¹

Working with the Congress, human rights and immigrant organizations that assist refugees as well as Arab ethnic organizations advocated granting refugee admissions to Iraqis in the humanitarian crisis.²² For example, the Chaldean Federation of America compiled a list of cases of Iraqis in humanitarian crisis as early as 2003 and made the data available to Iraq's neighboring nations and the United Nations, as well as the US government. The Federation worked with Michigan senator Carl Levin and Massachusetts senator Ted Kennedy in 2005 to persuade those who insisted that Iraqi refugees should not come to the United States by demonstrating that Iraqis in need of refuge were the by-product of the failed US policy.²³

Besides the oft-quoted comparison with the Fall of Saigon, the US response to the Iraqi humanitarian crisis can also be compared to the one at the time of post-Gulf War ethnic uprisings. The United States encouraged, though did not assist, these uprisings, which led to a large number of refugees. In 1991, Senator Kennedy opened the hearing on Iraqi refugees of the time by saying:

Never in recent history has a refugee tragedy of this magnitude exploded on the world in so short a time, a matter of days; and never have so many suffered while America looked the other way and

pretended it was not our fault, too. What has happened has happened, but there is no escape from America's complicity in this immense human tragedy.²⁴

Responding to congressional criticisms, the George H. W. Bush administration proposed to accept 132 Iraqi refugees back in FY 1993.²⁵ Although their acceptance did not remain in the memory of mainstream American society, *déjà vu* statements made by Senator Kennedy represent the view that if the United States initiates a war, it is morally responsible to the fate of those displaced by the war. Or in a reversed way, consciously or unconsciously, the government's desire to keep American responsibility for the postwar Iraqi situation obscure led to subdued attention paid toward the Iraqi humanitarian crisis.

B. American Responses to the Iraqi Situation

Responding to congressional voices, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice set up a task force in February 2007 and promised to accept 7,000 Iraqi refugees in FY 2007. (Actual acceptance fell far short of the goal at 1,608.) Starting with FY 2008, the US worldwide refugee ceiling was increased to 80,000, with 28,000 (FY 2008) and 37,000 (FY 2009) slots allocated to the Near East and South Asia. Positive actions were also taken in the interview and processing stages, resulting in 13,823 Iraqi admissions to the United States in FY 2009, still shy of the goal of 17,000.²⁶

Along with the overall improvement in refugee processing, there was an urgent need to specifically provide refuge to remaining LES corps members. Senator Kennedy was especially concerned with their fate from the beginning: "We do have a special obligation to keep faith with the Iraqis who have bravely worked for us and often paid a terrible price for it by providing them with safe refuge in the United States."²⁷ Thus he introduced the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act, which was enacted as a part of the Defense Authorization Act of FY 2006 (PL109-163), also called "Section 1059."

Under this section, up to fifty Iraqi and Afghan interpreters and translators who worked for the US government were granted Special Immigration Visas (SIVs) for FY 2006. This number was increased to five hundred in fiscal years 2007 and 2008, and then cut back to fifty in FY 2009 due to the creation of an additional category. Starting in FY 2008, contracted workers for more than one year became eligible for SIVs under Section 1244, incorporated in the Defense Authorization Act of FY 2008 (PL110-181). Under this section, five thousand SIVs became available annually to former

US employees and contractors.

According to State Department records, though, only a fraction of available SIVs have been used as of March 2012 (see table). In addition to the technical problems mentioned earlier, applicants for SIVs have to obtain proof of employment or contract from US governmental agencies, and the practical difficulty of doing so inhibits many of them from even applying for SIVs.

Special Immigrant Visa Use

Fiscal Year	Section 1059						Section 1244					
	Principals		Dependents		Total		Principals		Dependents		Total	
	Afghan	Iraqi	Afghan	Iraqi	Afghan	Iraqi	Afghan	Iraqi	Afghan	Iraqi	Afghan	Iraqi
2013*	9	1	21	1	30	2	93	214	106	310	199	524
2012	54	6	56	29	110	35	63	1,655	62	2,200	125	3,855
2011	34	8	53	32	87	40	3	317	28	352	31	669
2010	30	12	43	40	73	52	7	939	36	1,051	43	1,990
2009	21	30	30	38	51	68	262	1,418	366	1,347	628	2,765
2008	202	346	220	324	422	670	199	172	195	125	394	297
2007	95	431	69	383	164	814						
Total**	1,279		1,362		2,641		5,345		6,302		11,647	

Source: Special Immigrant Visa Statistics

* as of March 2013 ** includes other nationals

<http://www.travel.state.gov/pdf/SINumbers0313.pdf>

<http://www.travel.state.gov/pdf/SQNumbers0313.pdf>

Just as the humanitarian crisis of Iraqi LES was made invisible by the US government’s political consideration, their difficulty in obtaining SIVs was also caused by American political factors. In order to persuade the American public of the necessity of prolonged “war on terror” abroad and domestic “anti-terror” measures, Iraqi refugees were overly “securitized,” especially under the provisions of the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act. This law defines terrorism quite widely and regards those who have assisted in terrorist acts the same as terrorists and prohibits them from entering the United States. According to humanitarian organizations, even the victims of terrorism who pay ransom are regarded as providing “material support” to terrorists, and thus they are denied entry to the United States.

According to those who assist Iraqi refugees who are trying to enter the United States, having so many layers of procedures, with each of them taking time, creates unnecessary delays. For example, an Iraqi who under

peril flees the nation will be registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and then placed on file with an overseas processing entity. Then the name will be forwarded to the US State Department for a terrorist database check; then it needs an FBI Security Advisory Opinion, and finally it will need to clear the Homeland Security Department's enhanced security screening procedure. After all these security clearances, an overseas processing entity finally will give a medical exam, and then the refugee can depart for the United States.²⁸ The process can be further slowed down because new background checks were added in 2011 after two Iraqi refugees were arrested in Kentucky on terrorism charges of allegedly providing material support for al-Qaeda.²⁹

With such a high standard for getting a security clearance, many true refugees who are still in turmoil fail to meet one or two of the conditions. If they fail, they are categorized as "terrorist suspects" and denied access to the United States, even though they had cleared a previous security check required for working alongside Americans in Iraq. Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration Ellen Sauerbrey testified in 2007 that "in processing eligible Iraqis for resettlement in the United States, we will remain vigilant in preventing terrorists from gaining admission to our country." Senator Patrick J. Leahy in the same hearing criticized this stance by pointing out that "refugee admissions, an issue that's fundamental to America's role as the leading protector of fundamental human rights . . . and our national security are not really mutually exclusive."³⁰

The experience of Indochinese refugees whose cooperation with the American cause put them at risk of their lives was much more appreciated by Congress than that of Iraqis who assisted the US occupation. During the House floor debate in 2000 over legislation that would grant lenient citizenship criteria for former Hmong soldiers who fought alongside the CIA, for example, Rep. Bruce Vento's statement in the committee deliberation was reintroduced as an accepted norm: "They [the Hmong] probably have passed the most important test [for citizenship], Mr. Chairman, and that is risking their lives for the values and beliefs that we revere as Americans and saving American lives."³¹ Whatever the sacrifice that the local people may have accepted in cooperating with the United States, American society can freely change its evaluation of the sacrifice depending on their priorities of the time. In the Iraqi case, their sacrifice was re-evaluated against the threat of domestic terrorism in the United States.

III. RESETTLED IRAQIS AND THEIR HOST COMMUNITIES

A. The Reception of Refugees

Difficulties Iraqi refugees face during the admission process, however, may conceal the underlying difficulties they face during the resettlement process. In other words, the admission process for Iraqi people is difficult partly because some of them are suspected of possibly having a bad intention for entering the United States. Accepting them is regarded as potentially compromising US security from within. The more Iraq is characterized as a place of terrorism by the US government, the more firmly American society closes its local gates against the potential threat from abroad, namely Iraqi refugees and SIV holders.

We should also be aware that the admission and the resettlement of refugees, though constituting two sides of the coin, are different in nature. While admission is regulated by the federal government as part of border control, resettlement is a process that necessarily affects the lives of people in host communities. This is especially true if the secondary migration of refugees results in large concentrations of ethnic minorities in particular areas or if the inflow of people takes place during a time of diminishing local resources.

In the post-World War II period, when President Harry S. Truman issued the first order accepting European refugees exceeding the national quota because of special conditions, private voluntary organizations promised that they, rather than the government, would take care of the housing and employment of the accepted people.³² The same rule applied to the Indochinese refugees. The Christian Missionary Alliance, Church World Service, Hebrew Immigration Aid Service, International Rescue Committee, Latter Day Saints Social Service, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Tolstoy Foundation, and United States Catholic Conference were among those that assisted in the resettlement of Indochinese refugees in the early stage.³³

When the Refugee Act of 1980 was discussed, Senator Kennedy well recognized the problems involved and pointed out the necessity of governmental involvement in the resettling process during the committee deliberation: “This basic reform of the immigration law deals with only half the problem—the admission of refugees into the United States. We must also consider the problems involved in their resettlement in communities across our land, and what the Federal responsibility is to help in the resettlement process.”³⁴

The Refugee Act of 1980 gave refugees resettlement assistance from the federal government for up to three years. With such support, refugees were able to get accustomed to American society, learn English, receive job training, and become self-sufficient when the assistance eventually expired. As the American economic situation worsened in the 1980s, the length of time a refugee could receive resettlement assistance was phased down, and it now is provided for only eight months for those without accompanying underage children.³⁵ Moreover, the amount of cash assistance is based on the number of family members, which makes it more difficult for single refugees to maintain themselves.

A large group of Iraqi refugees and SIV holders arrived in the United States during one of the worst economic recessions. Those at the periphery were hit harder by the recession. In FY 2007, between 59 and 65 percent of refugees receiving cash assistance from the Office of Refugee Resettlement became self-sufficient within four to eight months, while the rate dropped to between 31 and 52 percent in FY 2009.³⁶

Iraqi refugees and SIV holders have had additional difficulties. There is a one-year waiting period before the refugees who enter the United States can apply for US citizenship. Job opportunities in which Iraqi refugees and SIV holders have a relative advantage often require citizenship because of security reasons. This forces them to leave the United States to get jobs, even if this counts against the waiting period and delays their citizenship application. In order to solve this dilemma, the US government was expected to create jobs that do not require citizenship and to prioritize employing Iraqis.³⁷

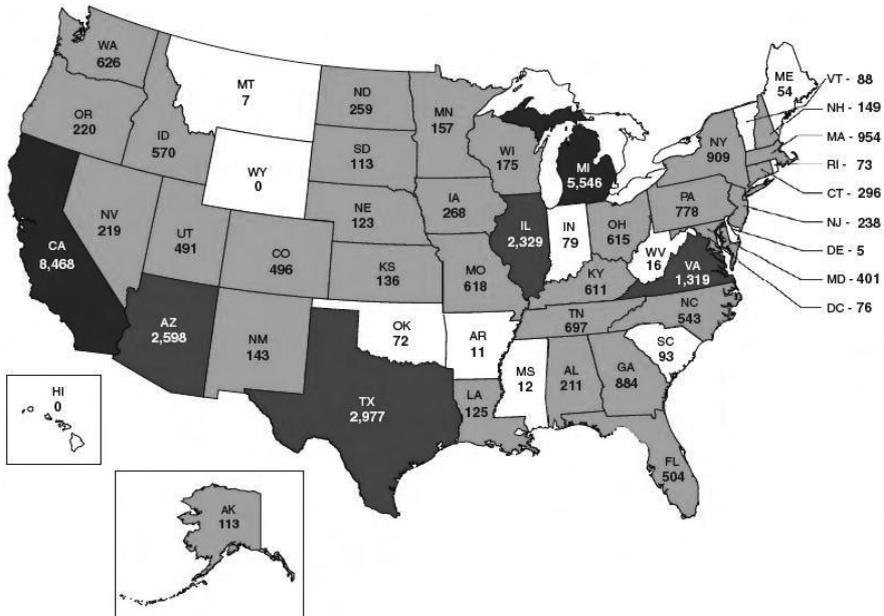
Unlike previous cases of Asian or African refugees, quite a few Iraqi refugees and SIV holders are highly educated professionals, including doctors, dentists, and lawyers, back home. Such professional work, however, requires recertification in the United States, and many give up the procedure because it takes too much money and time.³⁸ They end up taking jobs that do not match their skills.³⁹ Moreover, a relatively high number of Iraqi refugees and SIV holders suffer from PTSD or other health problems due to prolonged violence in their country, making it harder for them to become self-sufficient in a given period of time.

B. Nuanced Responses of the Host Community

As a rule, refugees cannot choose where to resettle, but eleven national voluntary resettlement agencies (VOLAGs) decide where they should resettle and make arrangements in the host communities. Although family

ties may be taken into consideration, avoiding too much concentration of one ethnic group is often prioritized, and thus those belonging to a certain ethnic group are scattered around nationally when they first arrive in the United States. Once refugees are in the United States, in order to be closer to relatives or places with which they have cultural affinity, or in order to find better living conditions such as education or welfare, a secondary migration of refugees often takes place. For example, the Minneapolis-St. Paul area now hosts the largest Hmong and Somali communities in the nation, largely due to the secondary migration in search of family ties, better education, or more generous welfare.

In the Iraqi case, the resettlement process was planned so as to spread Iraqi refugees and SIV holders among nine different regions; but they have eventually concentrated in the areas with existing Middle Eastern communities, which makes it easier for them to settle down. After California, Michigan gathered the second largest Iraqi population of all the states between 2006 and 2009 (see map). Currently, the largest Iraqi concentration



Initial Resettlement Numbers of Iraqi Refugees and SIV Holders, FY 2006 through 2009

Source: Government Accountability Office, *Iraqi Refugees and Special Immigrant Visa Holders Face Challenges Resettling in the United States and Obtaining U.S. Government Employment*, Washington, DC: GAO, 2010, 10.

in the United States is in the metropolitan Detroit area, namely Dearborn and Warrendale, where Iraqis of Shi'ite and Sunni Muslim background had formed a community during the decade after the Gulf War. There are also substantial numbers of Chaldeans, or Iraqi Christians, who have inhabited the area since the 1960s. As of 2008, the estimated size of Arab and Chaldean Americans in metro Detroit was fifty thousand,⁴⁰ and the number continues to grow.

Michigan is one of the states hardest hit by the recession. When the government announced the increased slots for Iraqi refugees and SIV holders, Mark Steenbergh, the mayor of Warren, neighboring Detroit, reportedly said that they “would burden city services and add to joblessness.”⁴¹ Federal assistance for refugee resettlement is not provided based on the number of refugees in real time but on the average of the previous three years. Thus the rapid growth of the refugee population puts a burden on local governments, even though the burden will eventually be reduced.

Concerned with the local cost, the State Department told the VOLAGs that no more Iraqi refugees could be settled in Michigan, except for those with close relatives as of 2008. However, this order could not stop the free movement of people, and the secondary migration from other states continued to flow into Michigan.⁴² As they move, refugees often fail to take proper procedures for transferring their federal assistance to their new locations, which causes further financial burdens for local governments. According to one of the local VOLAGs, the State Department policy triggered an opposite reaction, and about four hundred new Iraqis per year arrived in Detroit area after the adoption of the policy. Thus, the policy became less restrictive thereafter.⁴³ A substantial number of Chaldeans arrived as the persecution against Christians in Iraq worsened, especially after US troops were scaled down under the Barak Obama administration.⁴⁴

The state of Michigan eventually received \$1.1 million in FY 2009 and \$1.8 million in FY 2010 from the federal government for initial resettlement and additional funds for welfare and medical care.⁴⁵ But the federal support ends there, and the remaining responsibility to take care of the refugees then falls on state and local governments. Responding to the growing local financial burden, for example, Rep. Gary Peters of Michigan (9th district) introduced the Domestic Refugee Resettlement Reform and Modernization Act of 2011, asking for the initial federal support to be extended to cover full three-year period as authorized and implemented in earlier years. No statutory revision has been made to date.

Local communities sometimes are successfully persuaded for a greater support for Iraqi or Afghan co-ethnics. Iraqi and Afghan SIV holders are eligible for the same resettlement assistance, entitlement programs, and other benefits as refugees admitted under the US Refugee Admission Program, but the length of assistance was initially set at six months. The period of eligibility was extended to eight months for Iraqi, and later for Afghan, SIV holders in the National Defense Authorization Act of FY 2008 and the Omnibus Appropriations Act of 2009, respectively.

Local volunteer organizations and ethnic organizations tend to see refugees and SIV holders more positively, saying refugees would not have left Iraq if not for the war and would not have come to the United States if not for the available opportunities. Besides the financial burden, however, severe competition over limited job opportunities is a challenge for local communities. The Detroit Chaldean community, which includes many entrepreneurs, prioritizes refugees in hiring, and organizations such as the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants encourage local business to hire refugees possessing the skills they arrive with.⁴⁶ Still, some Arab Americans start to feel that the “welcome mat is becoming frayed” as more and more Iraqis flow into the Detroit area.⁴⁷

A long-term resettlement process requires the integration of refugees into the host community, as well as the transformation of the host community itself. Based on survey data and interviews conducted in refugee communities, the Migration Policy Institute issued a report suggesting a dynamic process of integration, namely, multidimensional and multigenerational integration supported by multiple players. After the initial resettlement, refugees as well as the host community aim for a short-term integration process through public assistance, economic activity, and acquiring financial literacy and legal status. Long-term integration requires empowerment, upward mobility, leadership among co-ethnics, cultural interaction, and ethnic solidarity.⁴⁸

Lack of information about new members of the community often makes it difficult for mutual integration to proceed. And the flow of such information can be blocked by the same political considerations that block initial acceptance of refugees. The case of Hmong refugees can make a good reference for how Iraqi refugees should relate with the local community. When Hmong refugees arrived in the United States and began to concentrate in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, information about their background was not shared with the local community due to the secrecy of the CIA mission they were involved in. What is more, the Hmong’s social characteristics,

such as large family size, extended family activities, the practice of shamanism, let alone their lack of English proficiency and unfamiliarity with urban life, made them quite “visible” in the community. Naturally, social conflicts emerged between the Hmong and local people, especially with local minorities with whom the Hmong had to compete for limited resources. It took a couple of decades before mutual integration started in local communities.

The lack of information about the Arab community in the United States ironically resulted from their mainstream status.⁴⁹ The Arab community started to form in the United States in the nineteenth century; this Arab population was predominantly Christian, mostly from Lebanon, until a more Muslim population immigrated in the late twentieth century.⁵⁰ Most Christian Arabs are categorized under “white” in the US census, so that data from the American Community Survey on language use or national origin is the only way to figure out the size of the national Arab community.

Such invisibility worked against the Arab community when American society identified terrorism with Middle Easterners in the 1990s and to greater extent after 9/11. Although Arabs had been a part of the United States for more than a century, they came to be regarded as an external security threat rather than an integral part of American society. There was a need to promote a better understanding of who they were among the general public, as well as to maintain a proud identity themselves. The Arab American National Museum was opened in 2005 as part of a Smithsonian Institution affiliated program with the effort of a Dearborn-based Arab community organization, ACCESS.⁵¹ The increasing Iraqi population with a distinctive background as war refugee is adding a new chapter to the story of the Arab community in the United States, as well as American society.

C. Remaining Questions

As American troops were withdrawn from Iraq, the Iraq War became another case of “organized forgetting” by the American psyche.⁵² But we cannot rewrite the history and erase the consequences of the Iraq War altogether, both in Iraq and in the United States. In reflecting on the decade of the Iraq War, there remain a couple of questions that await answers from American society. One is how to characterize the security of American society in relation to the battlegrounds of the “war on terror,” such as Iraq or Afghanistan. The other is how to characterize Iraqi refugees and SIV holders in American society, which is partly dependent on the answer to the former question but can also be proactively defined by developments in the

host communities.

Balancing the domestic quest for absolute security with the need to open up the borders in humanitarian crisis continues to pose a difficult challenge, since humanitarian crises can happen in places categorized as the sources of threat to the United States. Instead of decoupling the two, the US government politically utilizes how to handle the external threat, such as the killing of Osama Bin Laden, to make the American people feel safer than before.

Finding a balance tends to focus on technical aspects, such as shifting away from categorical treatment to individual treatment of applicants who are seen as potential terrorists, in order to make an opening for humanitarian admission of refugees who were formerly denied under categorical treatment. For example, in December 2010, the Hudson Institute held a panel discussion entitled “Misabeled as Terrorists: Government Inaction Keeps Refugee Families Apart” with religious and humanitarian organizations that are in daily contact with refugees. Before the panel, they had sent a letter to President Obama asking for special consideration for the cases in which the overbroad definition of terrorism is causing additional humanitarian distress for those who have already suffered disaster. Some Congress members have also tried to maintain the American ideal of humanitarianism in refugee policy by introducing bills to rectify the negative impacts, including amending some of the stipulations of the USA PATRIOT Act.

Recent cases for such dilemma include the possible acceptance of refugees from the Iraq-Iran border camp. One witness suggests a practical solution providing the balance between humanitarianism and security in the following way:

This means that first, a way needs to be found for the US, either within the existing law or by changing the law, to accept a significant portion of the camp residents for resettlement. Given the designation of the MEK/PMOI as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, this is difficult under existing anti-terrorist legislation. . . . Or, perhaps there are ways of simply specifying that this particular group is an exception to the anti-terrorist legislation.⁵³

Such practical answers to the balancing question are the telling proofs that the foundation of the American sense of security is rather weak. What seems to be an absolute security is supported by a structure that subordinates certain categories of people who are under American control and forces

them play the role of victim or threat depending on current needs of American society. A more fundamental answer to the problem of finding a balance is to recognize the dignity of individual refugees rather than picking up one group or another that may fit the needs of US refugee policy at a given time. Senator Leahy's following recognition of the worth of refugees, although a welcome stance in itself, still falls short of respecting the viewpoint of refugees: "The refugees we welcome to our shores contribute to the fabric of our Nation, and enrich the communities where they settle."⁵⁴

The difficulties Iraqi refugees faced during the early stage of war and the sense of moral obligation the American people felt toward the worsening humanitarian situation induced the current debate over where the United States should stand in terms of the refugee policy. Those who do not share the idea that the United States should be morally responsible for the fate of the Iraqis argue that it is better for Iraqi refugees either to repatriate or to settle in neighboring countries. How far and how long the argument of US moral obligation stands against this view is still unclear. Americans may not recognize a special obligation toward those Iraqis who did not directly contribute to the American occupation policies or did not directly suffer from the war.

The large inflow of Iraqi refugees and SIV holders only began around 2009; more arrivals are expected in the coming years due to the accumulated backlog in their processing. Even though the US economy is showing some recovery, it's too early to see how American society, especially in the Detroit area where Iraqis are already highly concentrated, will accommodate incoming Iraqis, both Muslim and Christian.

With the US withdrawal from Iraq, diaspora communities and humanitarian organizations have been concerned that the condition of religious minorities and the remaining LES corps in Iraq would be further worsened, and they appeal to US political leaders to secure their safety, saying that "the U.S. has an ongoing obligation to meet in spite of our withdrawal from the country."⁵⁵

If the moral obligation America as a society feels toward refugees is sincere, however, it should be expressed, not after the wrong wars have caused the humanitarian crisis, but ahead of time in preventing unnecessary wars.

CONCLUSION

This article has focused on the domestic front of the US Iraq War,

examining America's treatment of those who ended up becoming members of American society as a result of the war, namely, Iraqi refugees and SIV holders. As we have seen, refugee resettlement policies reflect a combination of humanitarianism and political purposes, and when there is a discrepancy between the principle of humanitarianism and political and security considerations, it has been the rule that the latter takes precedence over the former.

Moreover, refugee resettlement policies have been expediently utilized to transform the memories of American wars: rescuing Indochinese refugees helped transform the image of the Vietnam War into something positive by emphasizing the sacrifice and heroism of Hmong veterans rather than the negative aspects of the CIA's secret war; and opening up the gates toward Iraqi refugees and SIV holders has helped restore America's self-esteem as a leading humanitarian nation. The principle of humanitarianism spares American society the question of why such humanitarian crisis happened in the first place. Moreover, the dignity of refugees has been neglected in American perception, and they are reduced to being only a group of people who can be seen as victims or threats depending on which story is needed at the time.

The following proud statement well represents such political situation:

We should all be proud of the fact that the United States welcomes more refugees than any other country in the world. America's refugee resettlement program is consistent with the values of a nation committed to compassion. Our refugee policy also advances America's democratic values while safeguarding our national interests. And most importantly, it saves lives.⁵⁶

It may be argued that a nation has a moral obligation toward the fate of those who are involved in a war when it is initiated by that nation. If the humanitarian sacrifice remains unnoticed, such as the case with the Iraqi LES corps, the victims may feel betrayed by the very nation that has initiated the war. And as the model for long-term integration illustrates, it is not enough for the government to notice the suffering and respond by opening up the borders for the refugees, but local communities should also be given enough information as to why a particular group of refugees has ended up in their neighborhood. This, of course, also requires a proactive effort from the co-ethnic community.

Moreover, such shared understanding is necessary, first of all, for the

refugees to regain their dignity and be treated with respect in American society. Although the fate of refugees who end up in the United States is the product of the structure that subordinates them, the process of mutual integration in host communities can enable refugees to reverse such a subordinating structure. What refugees of wars started by the United States represent on the domestic front should not be the self-righteousness of those who are responsible for the humanitarian disaster but the story of the refugees themselves, who have overcome the disaster that was brought on them.

NOTES

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