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Living in Religious Time and Space: Iraqi Refugees in Dearborn, Michigan

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Mental health assessments of refugees during and after conflict have relied heavily on Western psychiatric constructs and standardized scales, despite the overwhelmingly non-Western backgrounds of most survivors of contemporary wars. A strict dependence on the paradigms and language of Western psychiatry risks inappropriately prioritizing syndromes, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, which, however important, are eclipsed by the concerns of local populations for whom indigenous idioms of distress may be more salient. Working in Dearborn, Michigan, home to the largest population of Iraqi refugees in the United States, 60 Iraqi refugee life stories were collected and analysed. These narratives provided rich data regarding the centrality of faith to the constructs of Iraqi identity, home, and future in the wake of political violence and exile. For these refugees, the description of the dislocation that results from uprooting is replaced by an alternative home that transcends time and space.

Keywords: Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), mental health assessments, Harvard Trauma Questionnaire, Iraqi refugees in US, Islam

Oh homeland of the innocent
Were you for us a graveyard?
Or a homeland?

—Iraqi poet in exile, Abd Al-Latif Ataymish (March 2004)

Rape, torture, and extrajudicial executions of family members are some of the traumas experienced by survivors of mass violence in their countries of origin; frequently these horrific experiences are followed by harrowing escapes, years of arduous existence in refugee camps, and perhaps exile. Edward Said describes exile as the ‘unhealable rift forced between a human being and

a native place, between the self and its true home' (2000: 357). As such, exile precipitates a 'condition of terminal loss' caused by a 'discontinuous state of being' (2000: 360).

To capture the trauma of refugees who have resettled in the West, clinicians have shifted from the traditional open-ended psychiatric interview to structured clinical interviews and shorter standardized symptom checklists for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), reportedly the most prevalent diagnosis among survivors of mass violence (Wilson and Keane 2004). These measures can specify the current acuteness of a disorder, track response to treatment, and communicate assessment results efficiently. However, by transforming the local distress idioms of survivors into the universal professional language of health complaints, the scales situate trauma in individual bodies rather than social happenings, emphasizing pathology rather than such meaningful events as cultural, especially religious, dislocations. Although the PTSD diagnosis critique has received considerable discussion in the social sciences literature (de Jong and Joop 2005; Breslau 2005), it remains the most common clinical framework in thinking about the well-being of refugees in the United States and among most of the non-governmental organizations working internationally.

In collaboration with the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, we developed the Iraqi version of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ), a scale that measures trauma events and symptoms in war-affected populations.¹ Despite the fact that religion sustains many refugees in their process of uprooting, forced migration, and integration into the host country, spiritual precepts are conspicuously absent in questionnaires and, in turn, from relief work (Gozdziak 2002). Psychological treatment models rarely incorporate any spiritual dimension. Further, although refugee services in the United States include assistance with housing, employment, and healthcare, the paradigm of support focuses on deficits and not on resiliency factors. We wished to address this gap in our understanding of the contribution that religious faith can bring to refugee survival.

This absence is especially striking when meeting the needs of recent refugees from the Middle East. The movement of people from this part of the world has been associated throughout history with interrelated issues of politics, land, and war. The geopolitical and economic aspects of these displacements are well analysed in the literature of the region (Black and Robinson 1993; Castles 1993; Shami 1996). However, studies dealing with the lived experiences of Middle Eastern refugees who resettle in the West are few. Some of these reports include Aswad's (1980; Aswad and Bilg  1996) ethnic case studies of Arabic-speaking communities in the United States and Shadid's (1991) study of the difficult integration of Muslim minorities in the Netherlands.

With the concentrated media coverage following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, the Iraqi refugee community in Dearborn, Michigan, became visible. However, there has been little in-depth examination of this community

despite the fact that it is the largest of its kind in North America. In this paper, we present a qualitative study of 60 Iraqi refugees resettled in Dearborn, Michigan, and illustrate how religion permeates their lives, including their core notions of identity, home, and future. We argue that a strict reliance on traditional psychiatric diagnoses and questionnaires overlooks the role faith plays in restoring self-definition to Muslim survivors. By using 'traditional psychiatric diagnoses' as a frame in this paper, we hope to influence health professionals to think far more broadly.

Context and Background

According to Weil, 'To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul' (2001: 41). Over the past three decades, anthropologists increasingly have become engaged in ethnographic studies of forced displacement (Colson 2003). Much of their work has attempted to describe the broader psychosocial and religious matters that various refugee groups confront in their countries of resettlement. A theme that emerges frequently in such studies is the myth of return.

The myth of return is an expression of exiles' yearning to be anchored. This construct has two main functions. First, it reinforces the kinship boundaries of the community and its links with the homeland (Al-Rasheed 1994; Dahya 1973). Second, it enables the migrant to manage the pain of failing to integrate into the host society (Al-Rasheed 1994; Dahya 1973). The myth is therefore a practical solution to the dilemma of falling between the cracks of two worlds, including two sets of norms. This is especially necessary when the customs of the two worlds are in conflict. Also, when a person cannot place his or her trust either in the present or in the future, an essentialized but lost culture is summoned to compensate for the absence.

However, it is a mistake to assume that the experience of becoming a refugee is necessarily felt as losing one's culture. While some refugees will devote their exile to recreating the home they have left behind, others will commit themselves to constructing a niche in their new country of asylum (Zetter 1999). The latter accept the need for transition and place greater emphasis on the integration of past values in their present and future lives by investing, for example, in their children's education. They hope for a return but do not believe in its eventuality (Zetter 1999).

Although the above explanations are useful in conveying the different ways in which refugees react to their displacement, they fail to explain why the myth of return varies between individuals. Al-Rasheed (1994), inspired by Kunz's (1981) classification of refugees according to the nature of their identification with their country of origin, argues that the development of the myth of return depends on the refugees' relationship with their homeland prior to flight and on their degree of marginality in regard to the society they have left behind. She illustrates her point by considering two refugee groups: Iraqi Arabs and Iraqi Assyrians. The first belong to the mainstream

population of Iraq, whereas the second are a Christian minority in Iraq. Al-Rasheed (1994) demonstrates that Iraqi Arab refugees, even after numerous years in exile, consider Iraq as their homeland and have every intention of returning once the desired political changes take place. In contrast, the Iraqi Assyrian refugees have severed all contacts with Iraq since their flight. Although many would like to visit Iraq, they see their exile as permanent. The same dichotomy can be found in Graham and Khosravi's (1997) description of refugees who settled in Sweden, more particularly the Armenians and Baha'is from Iran on one hand and the Iranian political refugees on the other.

Thus, exile can serve to bring together refugees' disjointed identities through their opposition to the host society's culture. The reaffirmation of refugees' identity allows them to hold fast to their past through an act of remembering and nostalgia, thereby giving constancy to their current life in exile. However, exile also has the reverse effect of preventing refugees from developing new roots, since they see full integration in the host country as letting go of the past. Consequently, the refugees find themselves 'caught between two worlds' (DeSantis 2001): the world of survival, which requires an orientation to the present, and the world of return, which results in an ambiguous orientation to almost any place of residence other than the homeland.

One of the ways refugees address the dilemma of being caught between two worlds is by turning to religion. Indeed, faith can serve as a source of emotional support, a form of social expression and political mobilization, and a vehicle for community building and group identity (De Voe 2002; Gozdziaik and Shandy 2002; Welaratna 1993). Further, the role of religion in coping with trauma becomes particularly significant in the debate between Western models of trauma and indigenous approaches to human suffering, which include spiritual beliefs and practices (Gozdziaik 2002). Studies have found that frequent religious involvement and greater intensity of religious experience may be associated with better health due to religion's promotion of social support, a sense of belonging, and convivial fellowship (Levin 1994). However, researchers have tended to neglect the diversity of spiritual beliefs that sustain many refugees in the processes of displacement, migration, and integration into the host society (Gozdziaik and Shandy 2002).

Religion plays an especially important role in the life of Muslim refugees, who understand their faith as a way of life embracing both the external and the internal world of its believers. McMichael (2002), drawing on research with Somali refugee women living in Australia, describes the ways Islam provides an enduring home that is carried throughout displacement and resettlement. Gozdziaik (2002) also illustrates how Islam offered a sustaining thread in the lives of Kosovar Albanians and helped them to overcome the threat of discontinuity that arises with displacement.

In this study, we show the importance of Islamic faith for Iraqi refugees. We argue that responses to their trauma should be explained not only in

terms of a universalistic human psychology, but also through a particular Islamic lens and cultural heritage. This background serves as a source of general, yet distinctive, conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them and gives meaningful form to a wide range of experiences—intellectual, emotional, and moral—for both individuals and groups (Geertz 2000).

Methodology

Field Site

The study was conducted in metropolitan Detroit, Michigan, where approximately 200,000 people of Arab descent live in and around the city; it is home to the oldest, largest, and most visible population of Arabs in North America (Baker *et al.* 2004). Seventy-five per cent of residents were born outside the United States. Virtually all nationalities and ethnicities from the Middle East are represented: Lebanon/Syria (37 per cent), Iraq (35 per cent), Palestine/Jordan (12 per cent), and Yemen (9 per cent). This population is deeply religious, with 58 per cent Christian and 42 per cent Muslim. Most Christians are dispersed throughout Detroit's suburbs, while two thirds of all Muslims live in the ethnic enclave community of Dearborn, Michigan, often dubbed 'Arab Detroit'. Compared to Arabs nationwide, the Arabs of Dearborn are more likely to be young Muslim immigrants, with large families and low incomes. For example, one fourth of the population reports family incomes less than \$20,000 per year. Fifteen per cent said they personally have had a bad experience after September 11 2001, because of their ethnicity. These experiences included verbal insults, workplace discrimination, special targeting by law enforcement, vandalism, and physical assault (Baker *et al.* 2004).

Since the 1991 Gulf War, metropolitan Detroit has absorbed over 3,000 Iraqis a year (Abraham and Shryock 2000). They have arrived directly from Iraq or via a third country, such as Iran, Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates. Although the Iraqis seeking refuge in the United States come from a cross-section of Iraqi society, most are Southern Shi'a Muslims who fled under conditions of political duress. Thus, their lives have been disrupted in significant ways. These men and their wives tend to be poorly educated; they struggle with the English language; work in low-wage, informal sector jobs without health insurance; and reside in crowded apartments. These refugees live with feelings of remorse and reactions to trauma, not only about the conditions under which they fled their country, but also about their country's political turmoil and their own experience as a refugee. Many of these Iraqis suffer from chronic illnesses that may be a result of the deplorable conditions in Rafha, the Saudi Arabian refugee camp where the majority lived for months or years. The Turkmen and Kurdish

refugees, who were mainly based in Northern Iraq, fled to refugee camps in Turkey.

The Iraqi community in metropolitan Detroit is not a cohesive unit. In addition to the divisions resulting from class, education, economic status, political convictions, and ideological beliefs, Iraqis are divided along lines of ethnicity. Three subcommunities live in the area: the Arabs, the Kurds, and the Chaldeans. Each has its own community centre, voluntary associations, and clubs. Upon arrival in Detroit, refugees are drawn toward their own ethnic group and voluntary associations.

Sample

For this study, we recruited a convenience sample of interviewees from the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) in Dearborn. Since its creation 30 years ago, ACCESS has grown to become the nation's largest and most comprehensive provider of Arab American human services, with nearly 108,000 yearly contacts in 70 different programmes as diverse as employment and environmental projects, arts and culture, health programmes, and youth and social services activities.

We used the following inclusion criteria in this study: (a) Iraqi-born, (b) Arabic speaker, (c) adult (age 21 and above), and (d) a refugee in the United States after the 1991 Gulf War. Thirty men and 30 women from various socio-economic backgrounds, representing the ethnic and religious diversity of Iraq, participated in the study (see Table 1).

Although the majority of participants were Shi'a Arabs, all Iraqi Muslims interviewed shared many values, customs, and norms of behaviour. Further, in spite of differences in religious beliefs and rituals, there were no clear cultural boundaries between Iraqi Christians and Muslims. Finally, at the level of the refugee experience, all Iraqis suffer from the well-documented problems relating to pre-existing human rights violations, flight, displacement, and uprooting.

Ethnographic Interviews

Health professionals can refine their understanding of psychological disturbance in refugees if they recognize both the personal and the cultural dimensions to the physical, mental, and moral losses survivors are trying to absorb (Kleinman *et al.* 1997). This anthropological view shows suffering as both an intersubjective process and a collective experience shaped by background, place, and time. These two kinds of suffering are best elaborated through life stories. Given its situational constructed nature, a life story is a strategy for self-representation, an attempt to make sense of the world, and a projection for the future (Geertz 2000).

Drawing on the above anthropological framework, we conducted 60 interviews on individual life stories in Arabic. The decision to conduct the meetings in Arabic rather than Kurdish or Turkman—the other two Iraqi

Table 1

Sociodemographic Characteristics	
Variable	Number (n = 60)
Sex	
Male	30
Female	30
Age, years	
18-34	17
35-54	30
55-64	7
≥65	6
Ethnicity	
Arab	42
Kurdish	6
Turkman	6
Chaldean	6
Religion	
Shi'a Muslim	48
Sunni Muslim	6
Christian	6
Place of birth in Iraq	
Arbil	3
Baghdad	10
Basra	9
Diwania	4
Kerbala	6
Kirkuk	7
Mosul	3
AnNajaf	5
Nasiriyah	4
Samawa	6
Sulaymaniyah	3
Marital status	
Married	43
Separated/Divorced	5
Widowed	9
Never Married	3
Education	
Less than primary	7
Primary	21
Secondary	9
Vocational/University	20
Imprisonment in Iraq ¹	
Yes	35
No	25

(continued)

Table 1

Continued	
Variable	Number (n = 60)
Year of flight from Iraq	
1990–1995	43
1996–2001	14
2002–2003	3
Employment status ²	
Working	24
Not working	36

¹Only 8 women were imprisoned.

²Thirty out of the 36 subjects not working are women.

languages—was based on the fact that Arabic is the primary language in Iraq and is understood by the majority of citizens.

In the interviews, we encouraged participants to provide a chronological account of their experience of life in Iraq, the decision to escape, the circumstances of their flight, the escape journey and transition in refugee camps, conditions surrounding their acceptance for resettlement by the United States, their early experiences in America, and the nature of their current social participation within the Iraqi community and the wider host community. As they described each stage of their life, we asked respondents also to express their emotional reactions to what was happening in their lives at that time. This included their feelings about living in and then leaving Iraq, their hopes and expectations of eventual return, and their degree of satisfaction with life in the United States.

To reconstruct their narratives, Iraqis needed not only the words with which to tell their stories but also an audience willing to hear their words as they intended them. Research shows the importance of open-ended interviews, emotional attunement, and genuine curiosity (Langewitz *et al.* 2002; Suchman *et al.* 1997). These characteristics comprise the kind of empathy that is crucial to such interviews. Thus, the interviewer's goal is to become an empathic listener by conveying to interviewees that they are not alone and are being understood. To be empathic, listeners must strive to see the world from the other's perspective, be strong enough to hear without injury, and be ready to experience some of the terror, grief, and rage experienced by the interviewees (Halpern and Weinstein 2004; Kleinman *et al.* 1997; Langer 1991; Shay 1994).

At the choice of the participants, the interviews were held in their homes, in ACCESS, in recreation centres, or in mosques. The conversations lasted approximately one hour and were conducted over a three-week period in July 2004. All meetings were audio tape-recorded. Informed consent forms, which fully described the research, put informants at ease once they realized

that the discussions were private and confidential. Further, since this community harbours deep mistrust of authorities, we offered every assurance to ensure the ultimate anonymity of the interviews. Strong support by community leaders enhanced the project's success.

We transcribed the interviews in Arabic. The Arabic transcripts constituted material for qualitative analysis using a grounded theory methodology (Miles 1984; Rubin 2005). This involved a coding procedure with three levels. The first level, the text-based category, codes words and phrases used regularly and repeatedly throughout the text. The second level, the sensitizing concept, codes culturally specific ideas and understandings implicit in the text-based categories. The third and highest level, the theoretical construct, reflects the organization of the sensitizing concepts into a theoretical framework. Each level subsumes the level below it. That is, each sensitizing concept is a cluster of text-based categories, and each theoretical construct is a cluster of sensitizing concepts. An Iraqi doctor and one of the authors (MS) coded the transcripts. As an additional check on our interpretation of the text, we presented our findings to 10 of the 60 men and women who participated in the study. The discussion occurred approximately 7 months after data collection. The subjects confirmed the accuracy of the report.

Findings

The Struggle to Define Identity

A male Muslim definition of 'refugee'. For exiles, membership and participation in their homeland is impossible. Consequently, they must redefine their social self within a new context. For Iraqi refugees in Dearborn, resettlement provided a medium through which the memory of the shared experience of uprooting was reworked to create new forms of identity based on a higher order justification.

Recognition of the enforced, and ascribed, position of 'refugee' was neither sought after nor desired by the men interviewed: 'Saddam exported our guns, not our culture . . . The world viewed us as terrorists; then as victims. We are neither' (Shi'a Muslim Arab man 29 years old).

Instead, many described themselves as *Muhajirin* ('those who leave their homes in the cause of Allah'; singular, *Muhajir*), conferring a noble aura to the Iraqi plight. According to Shahrani (cited in Daniel and Knudsen 1995), who noted the same self-definition among Afghani refugees in Pakistan, the Prophet Mohammad's *hijrah*—'the migration from the Domain of Disbelief to the Domain of Faith', only to return to establish the Faith—serves as a potent paradigm shared by Muslims. Indeed, Iraqis link their struggle to take back their homeland—from Saddam and from the Americans—with the suffering of the Prophet Mohammad: 'The Prophet said that he who escapes with his faith from one land to another, even if it is only the distance of an inch, will be worthy of paradise' (Sunni Muslim Arab man, 35 years old).

Thus, the identity of *Muhajir* serves as a centripetal anchor for Iraqi men, who otherwise may perceive themselves as failures living on government support in the United States. This religious notion of self empowers them by stabilizing their pre-exile identity. For the *Muhajir* leaves only to return to triumph over the enemy who has temporarily displaced him from his rightful home.

Women's quest for former selves. While men were striving for new and solid identities as religious warriors, the experience of women was quite different. Given that many women became refugees as a result of the political decisions of their husbands, exile in their case precipitated a state of liminality, a concept invoked by Al-Rasheed (1993: 92).

I don't feel settled. Nobody prepared me for this life. When I got married, I expected my husband to look after me and support me. That is what I have been told since I was a little girl (Shi'a Muslim Arab woman, 27 years old).

We live for our families and through our families. Exile (*al-ghorbah*) is a daily struggle. I feel like I'm dying every day in America (Sunni Muslim Turkman woman, 60 years old).

Al-Rasheed (1993) reported similar findings among exiled Iraqi women in London. She found that forced migration led to the breakdown of cultural expectations by threatening the notion that marriage is associated with settling down and establishing a family. And, since Iraqi women defined themselves wholly in terms of the roles they played in Iraq and for which they were evaluated and valued, they suffered more acutely from the collapse of their social world. According to Brison (2002), notions of self are created through the process of symbolic interaction. This fashioned self remains dynamic throughout people's lives, adapting as they encounter new people and situations. However, in certain extreme cases, this construct is so fundamentally challenged that individuals find themselves in a crisis of identity (Brison 2002). Indeed, even after 10 years in the United States, the restructuring of these women's assumptive worlds had not taken place. They continue to hold on to their former selves because these selves are more predictable and less damaged.

Rejection of Arab identity and creation of a unified Iraqi identity in exile. The above analysis illustrates how Iraqis negotiate on the basis of past, now lost, positions rather than present standings to secure a positive feeling of self. For Iraqi Arabs, both men and women, this identity management has also meant a rejection of their Arab character and the strengthening of their Iraqi one. In spite of a shared cultural heritage, Iraqi Arabs feel a keen sense of betrayal and mistrust vis-à-vis other Arab countries that did not come to their rescue during Saddam Hussein's reign of terror:

I fear that there will come a day when Iraqis will reject their Arabness. There are responsibilities that come with being Arab. But, our so-called brothers—the

Egyptians, the Syrians, the Palestinians, and the Saudis—have completely abandoned us. I, for one, am ashamed of being an Arab. I just prefer to say I am Iraqi (Shi'a Muslim Arab man, 55 years old).

When the question is asked, 'Who are you?' Iraqis may reply in terms of tribal, regional, or ethnic, ties. In America, they also stress their Muslim identity (Sunni Muslim Kurdish man, 37 years old).

Thus, with uprooting, trust was violated on several fronts and yet affirmed on the national and religious levels. On the national front, Iraqis feel that their pain is communal; it is their duty to bear it. As they transmit the Iraqi language and customs to their children, they also plan to pass on the Iraqi pain as part of their national identity. On the religious stage, the sentiment of Arabness is replaced by the sentiment of Islam.

A shift toward the internal world. Iraqi men and women in Dearborn practice a more fervent form of Islam, reflecting the Islamic revivals in the Middle East (Shami 1996). For example, *hijab* or head covering is very common; it represents pride and protection from the immoral standards of the surrounding community. For many Muslims in the West, Islam is a means of being 'global and transnational but not on Western terms' (Shami 1996: 18). Thus, Islam is interpreted and reinterpreted according to the specific pressures Iraqis have encountered in America:

In Iraq, life is much simpler. What my husband and I teach at home is reinforced by the culture. But, in America, we have too much responsibility to keep the family together. America has this way of brainwashing you (Sunni Muslim Kurdish woman, 42 years old).

Religion is what pulls us together now. It is not that we carry fundamentalism with us to America. It is our experiences in this country that makes us hold on tightly to our Islamic identity (Shi'a Muslim Arab woman, 44 years old).

Thus, even if the association of home with homeland is cast into doubt during preflight events, the irony of exile is that the geographical distance from one's country of origin often brings refugees emotionally closer to it, sometimes even closer than before their escape (Habib 1996). And, to the extent that refugees are marginalized, they are likely to continue to hold onto their difference and in so doing further accentuate the host population's perception of them as a threat to social cohesion (Barnes 2001).

The Struggle to Define Home

Living between a good and a bad America. Two competing images of America loomed large in the psyche of the Iraqi refugee community in Dearborn. Iraqi Arabs in general espoused the 'Bad America' view, while Chaldeans, Turkmen, and Kurds—minority groups in Iraq—adopted the

'Good America' stance. The difference between these disparate perceptions of the United States is where Iraqis imagine their home.

My son was born here... Even though he never lived in Iraq, he is scared to set foot in the country... Why? Because he sees the traces of Iraq's torture chambers on his dad's body and feels his pain... Saddam's atrocities have even touched my child born thousands of miles away... America is the only country that opened its arms to us. Here, I can practice my religion without fear of persecution. No one is above the law. There is no glorification of the leader (Shi'a Muslim Arab woman, 39 years old).

We don't belong in America. Americans don't want us here. I refuse to spend my life as a foreigner in a strange land. A person is only truly respected in his own country (Shi'a Muslim Arab man, 52 years old).

The Kurds, Chaldeans, and Turkmen, who concentrate primarily on the United States' internal affairs, are captivated by the country's religious freedom, cultural pluralism, and democratic processes. For these Iraqis, the opportunity to practise their faith in America, when compared to the brutality and autocracy of their own governments, remains the most thrilling aspect of life in the West. Further, these minorities regard their migration as more or less a permanent solution to a historically alienated existence in their homeland (Tripp 2000). Many of the Chaldeans interviewed had virtually no relatives left in Iraq; in Dearborn, they rely on an extended kinship network that links them with the already established Chaldean immigrants who came to Michigan in the 1950s. Individuals in these ethnic groups would like to be able to visit Iraq, but very few entertain the myth of return even after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime.

In contrast, Iraqi Arabs, who focus primarily on America's foreign policy, view the United States as dominating the Muslim world and seeking to globalize its immoral culture. While many welcomed the 1991 Western attack on the Iraqi government, the majority resented the fact that it could only be done through an invasion of their homeland. However, as this conflict did not result in what most hoped for (a change of government), they now see that war as an attack on their country and its people. They find the hardships caused by the US-sponsored United Nations sanctions on Iraq and the 2003 US-led invasion of their country as further evidence of America's intentions to steal their resources and eliminate Islam. They stress that they left their country because of various political pressures rather than economic necessity. They did not come here to establish roots; the majority described their migration as temporary even in those cases where people have already spent 10 years in the United States. For many of them, America is a holding tank until they can take back their lives in Iraq. Interestingly, most Iraqi Arabs claimed that the First Gulf War American delegation, with whom they met in refugee camps, told them that they would be provided with financial assistance, adequate housing, social services, and health benefits in the

United States. They maintained that they only accepted resettlement in America because they were promised respectable lives. They found that most refugee assistance in the United States ends after eight months. Since many could not become self-supporting at that time, they felt further 'cheated' by America. According to Bukhari *et al.* (2004: 112), these latter individuals are faced with a perplexing existential dilemma. They are not part of the Western or Islamic cultural mainstream; they live on the margins of both civilizations. If they perceive themselves as Western, then they suffer from cultural alienation, and if they conceive of themselves as part of the Muslim world, then they feel exiled. Hence, as long as Iraqis in the US solely hold on to their Islamic identity, they will experience this double alienation from the West and from the Islamic nation.

Home as social cohesion. Interestingly, all groups (Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and Chaldeans) referred to America as *balad* (country) rather than *watan* (homeland), which is the term reserved for Iraq. This notion of a homeland was in their minds closely linked to trust and social cohesion.

I have been in this *balad* for a long time, so I feel an obligation to America. But, my *watan* is Iraq. Iraq is very deep in my mind and in my heart (Christian Chaldean man, 51 years old).

In the United States, Iraqis feel that they need to negotiate not only in a strange culture but also even among themselves in a loose social environment wherein information about others is much harder to come by than in Iraq. According to them, in Iraq, one always knew someone who was familiar with the other party and could both supply information and exercise a kind of moral check. This especially applied to negotiating core identity ritual events, such as marriages.

My girl is 14 years old. It's time for her to get married. I found her a suitable husband who was 24. The social workers at ACCESS told me that the police would put me in jail if I went ahead with this marriage. I would be charged with the rape of my daughter?! I don't understand. Isn't this better than all these young American girls who are pregnant with no man? (Shi'a Muslim Kurdish woman, 34 years old).

Further, Iraqi Muslims talked of life in Iraq as being defined by the framework of Islam. Many emphasized that Islam and Iraqi culture are inseparable—daily existence is infused by Islamic morality and practice and reference to religion always featured as a unifying part of their collective identity. No differentiation is made between faith and culture; customs are not relegated to local Arab identity and, therefore, are not freely shed.

Home is also a 'nodal point of social relations' (Rapport and Dawson 1998). For example, Iraqi writers and artists claim that their work requires a process of interaction with a responsive audience. In Iraq, traditional

audiences, locally known as *lovers* (*usha'q*), engage in constant exchange with the performers, from whom they receive emotions and with whom they share their pleasure (Inati 2003). Many Iraqi writers and artists stated that they could not draw on such an audience in the United States. All of this clearly supports the framework of home as a space of identification (Rapport and Dawson 1998).

Home in religious space. The above examples show that refugees are not necessarily free to construct home according to their own will. While home may be a negotiated sociocultural construct, it cannot be separated completely from physical spaces (Rapport and Dawson 1998):

With every prayer, I ask Allah to prolong my life until I visit the shrines in AnNajaf. I like to be surrounded by the holiness of this place. I feel blessed in Iraq. You can't re-create this sanctity here (Shi'a Muslim Arab man, 55 years old).

AnNajaf is renowned as the site of the tomb of Imam Ali, who the Shi'a consider to be their founder. Nearby is the Wadi-us-Salam (Valley of Peace), claimed to be the largest cemetery in the Muslim world, containing the mausoleums of several other prophets. Many Iraqis aspire to be buried there and to be raised from the dead with Imam Ali on Judgment Day. Over the centuries, numerous schools, libraries, and convents were built around the shrine to make the city the centre of Shi'a learning and theology. Thus, although Iraqis have inscribed Islam on new physical spaces in the United States, they do not feel that their faith has as central a role in their contemporary lives. Islam, as all religions, therefore does have geography, which is often the repository of religious actions, narrations, and feelings. And, as the above quotation illustrates, certain locations have their place in the construction of the imaginative domain of Dar ul-Islam (The House of Islam) (Shami 1996).

The complex sense of home is conspicuous in these examples. No one country can be said to offer everything Iraqi refugees desire, in the sense of a home that meets all of a person's identities. There is the original homeland, which for some people no longer represents home, but has instead become the place of nostalgia; there is home in the sense of a place that fulfills a person's practical needs; and there is a home whose culture and religion best express identity.

Sense of security and threat: the aftermath of 9/11. During the interviews, Iraqis talked about their feelings of insecurity and exclusion following the events of 9/11:

I didn't leave my home for weeks. I was scared. Arab stores were vandalized, women's hijab was pulled from their heads; men were spat on, the FBI searched

our homes. I don't feel as safe in Dearborn since these events (Shi'a Muslim Turkmen woman, 25 years old).

Many Iraqis are now concerned with the immediate task of living in an environment that at once offers freedom as well as hostility. They are saddened by the irrational and incendiary media discourse on Muslims, which frequently makes terrorism synonymous with Islam. In the face of an onslaught against their faith, Iraqis feel that they cannot defend or assert themselves in any sustained way in the public space. Hence, they see their lives as precarious in the United States and many are considering resettlement in an Arabic Islamic country, such as Syria or Jordan.

The Role of Islam in Defining One's Future²

Islam gives meaning to suffering. Refugees described the public and private rituals of religious worship as ways to ease anxiety, defeat loneliness, and establish a sense of being loved. Many also voiced an explicit awareness that war and displacement have led them to place increased importance on their Muslim faith. Thus, Islam offers a causal framework depicting adversities as the will of Allah:

My suffering on this earth is a test that I must endure. I know that what has passed me by was not going to befall me and that what has befallen me was not going to pass me by. All I can do is go back to Allah and state my case and say 'Allah, help me'. The Prophet said to worship Allah as if you are seeing Him. For though I don't see him, he sees me. Being in the presence of Allah all the time brings me great comfort. . . . If I feel homesick or sad, I recite verses from the Qur'an, I face towards Mecca and pray, and I fast (Shi'a Muslim Arab man, 61 years old).

Allah is the empathic Other, who will always listen; no one's suffering is meaningless in His eyes. To stress this point, Iraqis also cited the following two Arabic sayings: 'Complaining to anyone but Allah is humiliation' and 'Get to know Allah in prosperity and He will know you in adversity.' Hence, Iraqis communicate with God by praying five times a day. The prayers not only give them a chance to express their feelings, hopes, and needs, but also help them alleviate stress and structure their lives. In this context, faith offers both individual and group strength in times of hardship through belief in a powerful Being.

A future in the hereafter. Further, to the extent that resettled refugees view themselves within a religious framework, an additional resolution to the issue of belonging is emerging, where the meaning of one's life transcends both the country of origin and the country of resettlement:

The Qur'an says that those who leave their homes in the cause of Allah, after suffering oppression, will be greatly rewarded in the Hereafter. Victory comes

with patience, relief with affliction, and ease with hardship. I've put my trust in Allah (Shi'a Muslim Kurdish man, 53 years old).

Muslims place much emphasis on the overriding power of God to determine all things. Not surprisingly, one of the earliest intellectual disputes in religious doctrine was over the issue of how human responsibility and free will can be reconciled with the absolute sovereignty of God in Islam, and Islam is still frequently described as fatalistic in the West. To counter that point, many Iraqis cited the following Qur'anic verse, where God says, 'Allah will not change the situation of a people until they change themselves.' Hence, the essence of suffering lies within the Muslim follower. In the same way, the exit from such a state depends on the Muslim's willingness to change him or herself in accordance with the teachings of Islam. Importantly, while some Iraqis used religious explanations and coping strategies to the exclusion of others, many more emphasized that Allah does indeed create all possibilities, but humans have the responsibility to choose their actions out of the many options before them.

This brings to the fore a central limitation of Western psychiatric instruments for assessing PTSD in grasping the experience of Iraqi refugees. The sense of agency of these refugees was truly enhanced by believing in a hereafter. For example, the majority of Iraqis had no sense of a foreshortened future—a common symptom experienced by survivors of long-lasting trauma—since they believed that God's kingdom is true home, where health and healing are promised to the faithful. The presence of this alternative world and future lifted their hopes and relieved their suffering:

You only go to Heaven if you live according to the teachings of the Prophet. That means striving for piety, filling your heart with love, extending kindness to others, forgiving wrongdoings, accepting your lot in life, and thanking Allah for all that He has given you. I focus on these teachings in my everyday life. They give me purpose, peace, and security. My home in the Hereafter will be built with my faith and good deeds (Sunni Muslim Arabic woman, 63 years old).

Thus, a symptom of PTSD as described in the biomedical model has little meaning in a culture in which the spiritual dimension offers a future of peace and security.

Discussion and Conclusion

The crisis that precipitates refugee status is at once personal and social and therefore is a predicament that pursues refugees into their lives in the country of asylum. Therefore, to understand these refugees in terms of post-traumatic symptoms alone is to fail to grasp their daily rhythms and, in particular, the way that Iraqi refugees address the problem of meaning by living in religious time and space. Thus, in confronting the suffering of survivors of mass violence, we argue that the primary responsibility of those who work with

refugees is not solely to classify their diseases. It is rather to engage intensively with the social and moral nature of their injuries. And, since the essential injuries brought about by atrocity are moral and social, so the central treatments should be moral and social. These treatments are those that restore self-definition to the survivor. Recovery is not a discrete process: it happens in people's lives and psychologies. It is grounded in the resumption of the sociocultural, spiritual, and economic activities that make the world intelligible. While there may be examples of those who have serious mental illness for whom traditional diagnoses and biomedical treatments will be most helpful, these are in the minority. For most, we argue for the larger view that recognizes and supports the unique cultural and spiritual dimensions of exile.

Western biomedicine is still grappling with a body–mind dualism that resists consensus. Consequently, the idea that one's religious background might influence health and outlook has remained 'part of the folklore of discussion on the fringes of the research community' (Levin 1994). Meitzen and his colleagues, who studied clinicians' knowledge of religious issues and their willingness to utilize such information in clinical practice, found a low level of religious awareness on the part of mental health professionals (Meitzen *et al.* 1998). They concluded, 'This level of religious knowledge would not, in many instances, suffice to comprehend the beliefs and presuppositions about life in the world which shape the inner dynamics of an authentically religious patient' (1998: 7). Sinclair (1993) further asserts that at its deepest level, PTSD is a spiritual diagnosis and that spiritual components need to be part of its treatment protocol. Finally, over the past decade, hundreds of published empirical studies have reported findings bearing on a possible salutary relationship between religion and health (Levin 1994).

In this study, we showed that religious coping was motivated by a search for meaning, intimacy, and self. In addition, religious coping was adaptively problem focused, particularly when individuals viewed God as an empathic Other. Pargament and Park (1995) proposed that as with any class of coping behaviour, religious coping can involve maladaptive processes, such as using religious explanations to the exclusion of others (attributing illness solely to sin), using only religious coping strategies (relying on prayer alone to resolve illness), and using religion to justify maladaptive behaviour (physical abuse in the name of scriptural discipline). Thus, clinicians should attend to their clients' potentially harmful religious coping behaviours while respecting religious orientation and seeking ways to support its beneficial effects.

We further argue that a better understanding of the tensions that render the constructs of identity, home, and time problematic for refugees can result in more culturally sensitive trauma instruments. However, since ethnographers interpret a field of interpersonal experience as they narrate the felt flow of the internal world, their interpretation is a creation as much as an observation (Kleinman *et al.* 1997). For ethnography to resist the transformation of human lives into stereotypes, it must not be experience-distant

(Kleinman *et al.* 1997). For example, current PTSD scales only seek yes/no answers to 'sense of foreshortened future' questions, which as we have elaborated could greatly illuminate a refugee's sense of agency if pursued further to include religious time. Thus, measures developed in community refugee populations using empirical approaches combining qualitative and quantitative methods may create scales that are more valid in representing the experiences of refugees than methods where data are only obtained from the outside via expert and consensus approaches (de Jong *et al.* 2001; Flaherty *et al.* 1998; Hollifield *et al.* 2002). Only then can what is lost in biomedical renditions—the dialectical tensions found in a man or woman's world of experience—be recovered in the refugee's own words.

In the context of rehabilitation in Western countries, specific cultural practices, such as religion in our Iraqi refugee, are often deemed irrelevant by caseworkers who seek to neutralize differences to provide each person with an equal start (Daniel and Knudsen 1995). However, these cultural practices are the foundation on which a meaningful self-definition for survivors may be restored. Our experience with the Dearborn refugee population reinforces our view that it is vital for providers to understand and utilize the religious context of their clients' suffering in planning psychosocial interventions.

Researchers must consider the contextual nature of suffering, which necessarily involves issues of meaning, value, and many profoundly rooted beliefs that contribute to the way individuals see themselves and their world. Future research should place greater emphasis on these variables by ascribing more weight to alternative understandings and developing more culture-sensitive research methods. This study illustrates the importance of faith in understanding the constructs of identity, home, and future for Iraqi refugees in Michigan. Their commitment to Islam is not only lifelong, but also life-wide. For these refugees, the allusions to liminality and homelessness widespread in the descriptions of dislocation, uprooting, and exile are replaced by an alternative home that transcends time and space.

1. A report of the Iraqi version of the HTQ is in preparation.
2. With 54 of 60 respondents being Muslim, we chose to focus on Islam in our analysis. However, an examination of the transcribed interviews from the 6 Iraqi Christian refugees showed that their lives were also structured by the framework of Christianity and that their faith offered them strength in times of hardship. Although one cannot generalize from such a small sample, a question arises about whether religious coping is specific to refugees from the Middle East, where religion permeates daily life.

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