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Palestinian and Iraqi Women Refugees: An Examination of the Past Sixty Years

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Introduction

Palestinian and Iraqi women refugees face daily challenges that many women throughout the world do not. These refugees cope with issues like poverty, deprived living conditions, violence, and sexual abuse, while access to medical and educational facilities remains limited. They depend on assistance provided by the United Nations, the United States, and host nations. According to several refugee commissions, the chronic underfunding of the United Nations' humanitarian organizations threatens to force a severe financial cut in the number and level of services provided to refugees. Urgent action is needed to ensure basic supplies, health care, adequate education, and psychological support reach families sheltered in occupied countries.1

Researchers have investigated Palestinian refugee women to better understand their situation and to help alleviate the historical and social conditions that challenge the diaspora. This project examined Palestine’s sixty-year history, beginning with Israel’s declaration of statehood in 1948. This project is a comparative analysis that examines the research conducted on Palestinian refugees to determine how well that body of work can apply to Iraqi refugee women internally displaced following the American-led invasion in 2003. This paper seeks to answer the following questions: From which social and economic background do these women originate? How did this affect their displacement? Where did they go and what was their social situation? How do Palestinian and Iraqi refugees differ on these points?

This information becomes especially vital considering the limited research conducted on Iraqi refugee women. Palestinian and Iraqi refugee women are two significant populations worth studying because of their growing numbers and the worldwide attention they have received due to their increasing plight. By better understanding Palestinian and Iraqi women’s roles in their societies and histories, researchers can reject personal biases and make well-informed recommendations to help alleviate the collective concerns of these refugees. This paper also aims to make educated recommendations to governmental and humanitarian organizations thus adding to the dialogue on the social concerns of these women. Further, it attempts to predict and project future needs of Palestinian and Iraqi women refugees.

The Middle East: A History of Colonization

It is important first to take a step back and revisit the historical role foreign involvement has played in the Middle East to comprehend the current political, economic, and humanitarian climate in the region. Professor Mark LeVine comments on the importance of understanding how colonization has shaped Middle Eastern history in Why They Don’t Hate Us: Lifting the Veil on the Axis of Evil; he states, “Without the colonial context we have no way of understanding the roots of the country’s more recent history, including the dynamics of U.S. rule.”2 Many of the Middle East’s current problems have deep roots in the manner Europeans colonized this area. For example, faulty mediation and deception by British and French imperial powers helped increase the tensions within the Middle East. In 1916, the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement between Great Britain and France discussed the division of the Ottoman Empire and its placement under foreign mandates. The interaction between ethnic populations and the distribution of natural resources came second to securing national interests of foreign powers. The agreement, however, con-

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tracted what British officials promised Arabs and Sharif Hussein of Mecca two years earlier in 1915. Sir Henry McMahon originally promised Hussein an Arab Kingdom in exchange for a military alliance to help defeat the Ottoman Empire and its ally Germany. Hussein believed this Arab kingdom would include all of Palestine plus Iraq, Syria, and Transjordan but the correspondence did not lucidly state exact borders. When the Central Powers were defeated in 1918, the once great Ottoman Empire dissolved into British- and French-controlled mandates. The colonization, deception, and miscommunication between European powers and the Arab world helped complicate relations that exist to this day in the Middle East.

Colonization and foreign intervention in the Middle East helped produce tensions between Arabs and Jews. The creation of a Jewish state contradicted what Arthur James Balfour, British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, stated in 1917: “His Majesty’s Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people. . . Nothing shall be done to prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.” After the foreign mandate and end of British colonial rule in Palestine, David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, declared on May 14, 1948, the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. This challenged the Balfour declaration because the subsequent Arab-Israeli War and the growing violence in the region forced six hundred to seven hundred thousand Palestinians—about 80 percent of Palestinians living in 1948 Palestine—to take shelter in refugee camps throughout neighboring Arab countries set up by the United Nations. The years between 1947 and 1967 form the nucleus of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Almost twenty years after the Israeli’s War of Independence—or the Palestinian’s al-nakba, meaning “the catastrophe”—another war commenced in 1967 when Israel launched a preemptive strike against Egypt’s air forces that caused Egypt, Jordan, and Syria to declare war. Two opposing forces, the Palestinians and Israelis, fought to control certain areas they both considered rightfully their own in what has been called the Six-Day War. In the aftermath of the war, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. Israeli presence in the Occupied Territories has furthered Palestinian hostilities and resentment; protests and resistance became, and remain, daily affairs. Since the Six-Day War, nationalism, fundamentalism, violence, and terrorism on both sides have prevented peace from reaching the Middle East.

After Israeli’s declaration of statehood, four to five million Palestinians and their descendents have been displaced throughout the Middle East and the world. Within the Middle East, this conflict affects neighboring countries as refugees pour across borders seeking asylum. Across the globe, nations are forced to make foreign policy decisions regarding financial and military support for Palestine and Israel. International foreign policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict can create admiration or enmity.

Iraq’s Historical Information

Again, to comprehend the current political, economic, and humanitarian situation in Iraq, it is important first to take a step back and briefly revisit the history. Phebe Marr, author of The Modern History of Iraq, states, “When its human and material resources have been well managed, Iraq has been a center of civilization and creativity whose benefits have spread to the rest of the world; when its leaders have failed, the result has been chaos, civil war, and economic stagnation.” This has proven true throughout Iraq’s history, beginning with the “cradle of civilization” in Mesopotamia in the fourth millennium BC, and still exists today in the war-torn modern state of Iraq.

Similar to the Palestinians, many of the problems with contemporary Iraq have roots in the European colonization of the Middle East after World War I. In 1920, Iraq’s borders were drawn by the British and included three former provinces of the Ottoman Empire without regard to the diverse populations, natural resources, and geographic terrains that existed there. Twelve years later, Iraq became the first Arab state to gain independence from the British mandate. Along with the influence of colonial rule, Iraq’s cultural, economic, and political history has been shaped by the Hashemite Royal Family, the Nationalists, the Iraqi Communist Party of the 1950s and 1960s, the Kurdish parties, Saddam Hussein and the Ba’athist Party, and, more recently, the US occupation. Wars have left a lasting impact on Iraq’s legacy. In 1980, the first of four conflicts involving Iraq began when Saddam Hussein declared war on the newly established Islamic state of Iran. The Iran-Iraq war lasted into 1988 and caused billions of dollars in damage and millions of human causalities on both sides. Hussein financed the war with money borrowed from foreign lenders, including neighboring Kuwait. With Iraq indebted to Kuwait, among other reasons, Hussein commenced another war in 1990 and invaded the oil-rich country; a year later, American troops entered the conflict known as Operation Desert Storm. Hussein’s actions in Kuwait resulted in internationally imposed economic sanctions that lasted from 1990 until 2003. They are considered by some to be the most comprehensive of all time. These sanctions unintentionally hindered the provision of social services such as health and education, while the levels of poverty and malnutrition increased. Adding to the hardships created by sanctions was the onset of the second Gulf War, or Operation Iraqi Freedom, which began

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5 Ibid.,
in 2003 and continues today. America’s War on Terror shifted its focus from Afghanistan to Iraq to dismantle Hussein’s regime utilizing the rhetoric of Iraq’s violation of the United Nations’ charters regarding weapons of mass destruction. Since the occupation of Iraq and the dissolution of the central authority, war and sectarian violence between religious and ethnic groups forces Iraqis to seek safer homes and has created one of the largest migrations of asylum-seekers since the Palestinians’ plight in 1948. An estimated two million Iraqi refugees have fled into neighboring countries, which has strained the economies and natural resources of those host countries. Another 2.2 million Iraqis have moved within the country to search for safer land.9

### The Collective Concerns of Palestinians and Iraqis

To understand how the refugee crisis affects women, it is critical to first look at the collective concerns of Palestinians and Iraqis. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East’s Web site, Palestinian refugees are defined as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict.” 8 UNRWA’s definition of a refugee also covers the descendants of persons who became refugees in 1948.8 In 1948, the Arab population of Palestine totaled 1.4 million; 900,000 Palestinians inhabited the territory that became Israel, 840,000 of whom were displaced. About 300,000 Palestinians sought asylum outside of Palestine, while the rest attempted to relocate in Gaza or the West Bank. 11

Many Palestinians fled their homes due to increasing violence; however, the fear of the capabilities of Israeli soldiers also served as a secondary motive for Palestinian exodus. Rumors of massacres and rape traveled quickly from one village to another.12 Samia, an Arab Christian, describes the situation to Wendy Pearlman:

> We were living in West Jerusalem in 1948, and we evacuated our house and moved to Birzeit, which was my father and grandfather’s hometown. We left out of fear. People were so afraid after they heard about the massacre at Deir Yassin. Members of the Irgun and Jewish underground came in trucks to the Palestinian areas and announced, “Look at what has happened! Leave the country! This can happen to you, too” . . . So, many of the refugees left because they were afraid.13

Violence and fear proliferated in Palestinian villages because crimes against women and children threatened the core of Palestinian life—the family. Palestinian tradition values the protection of women and children within the immediate family; a Palestinian peasant man once said, “My village, Sa’sa, didn’t leave because of a battle. . . There were other massacres—Jish, Deir Yasseen—and there were stories of attacks on women’s honour. Our villagers were especially concerned to protect their women, and because of this fear, many of the northern villages evacuated even before the war reached them.”14 Fear of massacres and threats on women’s honor encouraged many Palestinians to take flight.

Socioeconomic challenges confront Palestinians every day. In a dialogue moderated by the BBC, Mona, a Palestinian student from Gaza, and Anav, an Israeli literature graduate, exchange three letters describing their lives in Gaza and in Southern Israel, respectively. Mona states:

> Gaza is like hell. . . When Israel dismantled its illegal settlements and disengaged from the Gaza Strip in 2005, I was happy that I would finally be able to visit my friend who lives in the middle of the Strip whenever I wanted. But Israel didn’t leave us [in] peace. How would you feel if someone else controlled your every movement? How would you feel if you didn’t have the right to move inside your country; if you were prevented from studying abroad; if the cost of food and fuel was determined by someone else closing your borders; if you spent most of your nights in darkness? Why are patients prevented from having medicine?15

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Mona describes the situation that faces many Palestinians living in Gaza, while Ahlam Allan-Kader, a 25-year-old Palestinian student at Grand Valley State University, described her four years spent in high school in the West Bank as “interesting.” She remembers how her family and the families living in the neighboring refugee camp used to interact. Ahlam said, “We used to go to their weddings, they’d go to ours. . . They are sweet people, they are trying to make due with what they have. Everything is so expensive, and a lot of them cannot afford to update their concrete homes.”16 Without a homeland of their own, generations of Palestinian refugees are forced to live in camps and rely on host governments and international organizations to provide medical and social services for survival.

Like Palestinians, millions of Iraqi refugees sought protection within their homeland, throughout the Middle East, and abroad because of the waves of internal violence and war. About half of the total refugee population migrated within Iraq to search for safer land while the other half fled abroad. Children comprise the large majority of internally displaced Iraqis in early 2008—about 60 percent of the total population in exodus. Women make up the second largest percentage of internally displaced Iraqis, comprising about 25 percent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number of Refugees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internally displaced</td>
<td>1,900,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>1,200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>750,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>54,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia and Gulf States</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The majority of Iraqi refugees who fled abroad are in Jordan and Syria while a smaller number have sought refuge in Lebanon, Egypt, Iran, Sweden, and the United States.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month/2008</th>
<th>Number of Individuals</th>
<th>% Children</th>
<th>% Women</th>
<th>% Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>2,172,657</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>2,196,763</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>2,225,363</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>2,173,154</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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17 Tripp, A History of Iraq, 308.
Iraqis fled their homes because of violence and breakdowns in security. During 2006 and early 2007, an average of 100 Iraqi civilians were killed per day. Fundamentalist insurgents add to the hardships of religious minorities. For example, in Basra, a mini-theocratic state run by militiamen imposed a ban on alcohol and women were forced to wear headscarves. The BBC’s Paul Wood visited Basra in December 2007 and discovered that “forty-two women have been murdered over the past three months for wearing make-up, or failing to wear the hejab. . . One official figures half of the city’s Christian population has fled—and that’s probably an underestimate.” Insurgent threats, government-protected militias, death squads, and foreign militaries instilled fear into Iraqis—many of whom have large families they must protect—and they are left no choice but to evacuate. Iraqis across every socioeconomic class, ethnicity, and religious background have been overwhelmed by the internal migration. Often, families move once for immediate relief from pertinent threats, such as nearby violence and bombings, and then move again for security, housing, water, and electricity. Dr. Said Hakki, president of the Red Crescent, another international humanitarian non-governmental organization, said some of the most tragic consequences of the internal Iraqi migration turn up where destitute Iraqi villagers have collected in camps, shantytowns, and urban slums after leaving behind their homes and belongings.

Some Iraqis turned to family and friends for refuge within Iraq, while others moved into other countries to seek security. Upon entrance into these nations, refugees often face resentment and are treated like outsiders, tourists, or illegal immigrants. Iraqis face difficulties gaining legal work in host countries such as Jordan and Syria and are increasingly desperate for and in need of humanitarian assistance. Refugees face challenges in finding housing, obtaining food, and gaining access to health and education systems.

Personal and family security commands a central role in Iraq’s decisions to leave. The San Francisco Chronicle reported in January 2007 that “all kinds of people, from university professors to bakers, have been targeted by militias, insurgents and criminals. An estimated 331 school teachers were slain in the first four months of last year, according to Human Rights Watch, and at least 2,000 Iraqi doctors have been killed and 250 kidnapped since the 2003 U.S. invasion.” Statistics show 40 percent of Iraq’s middle class, including lawyers, doctors, teachers, and businessmen, have fled Iraq. Professional Iraqis, especially those working with Americans, are susceptible to threats on their lives and those of family members as well. For example, Khalil, an artist, painted portraits for US troops and began receiving anonymous and threatening letters. Three weeks after the first letter, insurgents burned his gallery to the ground; shortly after this attack, a firebomb was thrown into his living room. Ammar Abdul-lah, who also relocated to Damascus, said, “I used to run a translating bureau in Baghdad. I left in November last year after I received a threatening letter with a bullet in it saying don’t ever open the office again. I closed up, and a few days later a car bomb went off outside and completely demolished the office.”

Middle-class Iraqis, and especially those working with the Americans, have been targeted by radical insurgents.

Palestinian Migration and the Implications for Women

Almost sixty years before the Iraqi refugee crisis, many Palestinians first looked for refuge close to home within Gaza and the West Bank because they believed they could return home within a couple of weeks. However, most Palestinians could not return to their homes because of increasing violence, restrictive occupation of their land, and frequent demolition of homes. After the realization that they could not go back, a minority of middle- to upper-class Palestinian refugees moved into neighboring Arab states to rent apartments and start a new life in cities such as Amman, Beirut, Cairo, and Damascus. However, the bulk of Palestinian refugees lived off of the land as poor peasant farmers with little savings. These refugees became the vast majority who relocated into camps provided by the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations. In her article “Reconstructing Place for Palestinian Refugee Women: The Dialects of Empowerment,” Abu-Ghazaleh presents various Palestinian women’s firsthand accounts of life within various refugee camps. She reported that refugee camp life in 1948 led to physical ailments because of space restrictions, crowded living conditions, housing deficiencies, and poor overall infrastructure in the camp.

She quoted a woman from the Balata Camp in the West Bank who said, “Here,
increased from 914,000 to 4.4 million, a Palestinian refugees from 1950 to 2005 according to UNRWA, the number of registered Middle East continues to grow. Among those refugees who live throughout the Middle East continues to grow. According to UNRWA, the number of registered Palestinian refugees from 1950 to 2005 increased from 914,000 to 4.4 million, a 20.7 percent increase; about 1.3 million of those refugees live in fifty-eight recognized camps in the Gaza Strip, West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

About one million of these Palestinian refugees live throughout the twenty-seven camps in the Gaza Strip and West Bank: these camps face poor socioeconomic conditions with an extremely high population density. For example, in Gaza's Beach Camp, about 81,000 Palestinian refugees live within a single square kilometer. The high population density has created other problems—UNRWA's Web site claims that in Camp Number One, located in the West Bank, "there is serious overcrowding, and the narrow alleys are in desperate need of repair. During funerals, the deceased are usually passed through windows from one shelter to another in order to reach the camp's main street." Though this may seem extreme, overcrowdedness is causing problems in other sectors as well, such as basic infrastructure of roads and sewers. In fact, in 1992, the West Bank and Gaza Strip's refugee camps had proper sewage in only 31 percent and 27 percent of camps, respectively. Otherwise, camps utilize open sewers. This poses a serious health risk that is intensified by overcrowding.

Because of the high population density, medical issues are rampant while medical services are overextended. On average, each doctor in the health clinics attends to one hundred patients per day, and refugees are sometimes forced to seek medical services outside the camp but cannot because of blockades. Overcrowding and poor sanitation can rapidly spread sickness and disease. Garbage and waste fill the streets when trash removal services cannot maneuver the crowded roads or narrow alleys. Likewise, bacteria and infectious disease can easily infiltrate drinking water reserves, which can lead to gastro-intestinal problems such as dysentery that most negatively affect infants, children, and the elderly. Inadequate sanitation and unclean water, especially in overcrowded camps, "are classic preconditions for infections such as viral, bacterial, fungal, and parasitic diseases. . . Birzeit Community Health Unit reports that 48 percent of elementary schoolchildren in three West Bank camps were infected with intestinal parasites; malnutrition accompanied the parasitic infections, making the children more susceptible to infection." Preventable sicknesses such as waterborne and respiratory diseases are common among overcrowded Palestinian refugee camps because of overextended medical clinics, poor sanitation, and contaminated water.

According to the United Nations and other international humanitarian organizations, Palestinian women in the Israeli-occupied territories have "borne the brunt" of the occupation. The combined relationship between poverty, occupation, and violence helps promote women's second-rate position in society. The poor socioeconomic conditions of the refugee camps are directly related to violence against women. These violent acts add to women's hardships because of the cultural norms that discourage women from seeking help for domestic and violent abuse; thus they become easy targets for men. In her work A Feminist Politics of Health Care, Elise G. Young wrote that "women are specific targets of policies meant to demoralize, dispossess, and disempower Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. These policies include humiliation of women arrested, through physical and sexual terrorism; deportation; and attempts to control reproduction." The violent acts committed against women create psychological problems for the victims and often for their families as well. Ahmed, a clinical psychologist, comments on the psychological well-being of Palestinian women: "Palestinian women have experienced a double suffering. Some women have been beaten and tortured inside Israeli prisons. Hundreds of thousands have lost their husbands when they were killed, detained, or deported. Our traditional ways have not prepared Palestinian women for the responsibility of being the sole head of a household in a husband's absence." Violence promotes and perpetuates women's seemingly second-class position in society by forcing them to choose safety, by staying within the

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33 Farsoun and Aruri, Palestine, 122.
35 Ibid.
38 Pearlman, Occupied Voices, 196.
domestic domain, or risk exploitation in the public arena. Palestinian women of all socioeconomic classes in the Occupied Territories share common grievances of gender oppression and violence from foreign occupiers and Palestinian men. Women encounter complexities that arise from overpopulation in the refugee camps effecting safety, health, education, and employment. Further, violence against women from both occupying and Palestinian men puts women in a secondary position in society.

Since 1948, the importance of the Palestinian family has become evident, re-inforced by their efforts to keep families together and protect the honor of their women. Sixty years ago, Palestinians left their homeland because of increasing violence, insecurity, and atrocities committed at Deir Yassin and Jish. Moreover, Palestinians wanted to stay close to their homes because they believed a return was eminent. But generations later, they remain in camps with barely livable conditions. Violence proliferates in the Occupied Territories and this trend appears to be repeating itself with the Iraqi women displaced during the American occupation since 2003.

Iraqi Migration and the Implications for Women

The American-led invasion of Iraq has garnered considerable international attention that has shed light on the country’s refugee crisis. Although research on Iraqi women refugees is far less abundant than the research on Palestinian women, it does exist. Global Research studied Iraqi women refugees and discovered Iraqi women’s rights and living conditions have deteriorated since the American-led invasion in 2003. The Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, a nongovernmental organization, conducted a study on Iraqi women refugees who fled to Jordan and concluded that because they cannot work, these women are “at particular risk of sexual exploitation and abuse; they may be forced into prostitution and sex work as they struggle to support their families. Most refugees cannot afford to send their children to school or pay for even basic health care.” 39 According to the New York Times and other sources, an estimated 50,000 Iraqi women and young girls sell their bodies into prostitution. 40 Iraqi women refugees, both abroad and internally displaced, face increasing rates of violence—especially sexual violence, mortal threats, and kidnappings. A World Health Organization survey conducted in 2006-07 found that 21.2 percent of Iraqi women had experienced physical violence. 41 Not only do women face challenges created by violence and sexual exploitation, educational and literacy services are on the decline. Ironically, Iraq was one of the few countries in the Middle East that invested in the education of its women. In the early 1980s, “the Ba’th position on women was relatively progressive to start with, encouraging their education, literacy, and professional advancement. Initially, the war encouraged this by providing jobs for women and integrating them further into the workforce, particularly professional and educated women.” 42 But this situation began to change during the late 1980s because of heightened militarization that prepared Iraq for war. In the late 1990s, women’s illiteracy grew to 55 percent. 43 As a result of the Iran-Iraq War, the invasion of Kuwait, and sanctions, economic hardships increased in the late 1980s and into the 1990s which raised the number of women-headed households and working women. Since the latest war in Iraq, education and literacy services offered to women continue to decline.

Maram, a 26-year-old Iraqi woman who came to the United States just two years ago, reiterated the complex issues associated with American involvement in Iraq such as the instability in security and women’s position in society. Similar to many other personal accounts, she seemed to have mixed within her a sense of nostalgia for the personal safekeeping provided by Saddam’s regime and hopefulness for a better future, especially for women.

Before 2003, Maram remembered, “It was better because there was security. You could go out in the middle of the night and it was safe.” But she was optimistic, even happy, when the Americans invaded because of the potential change it could bring. “We didn’t have satellite, cell phones, or even the Internet. . . We have more freedoms with the Internet; we can chat, and with cell phones we can keep in contact with family members.” However, her attitude changed when security within Iraq worsened.

As a translator working in a hospital on an American base in Mosul, Maram’s biggest concern was personal and familial safety. Often, Iraqis and their families who associate themselves with Americans become targets for kidnapping, rape, or murder. Maram worked at the hospital for fourteen months and left the base only four times, each time with armed American protection because she was afraid someone would see her and put her or her family at risk. When asked what she would like to see in Iraq’s future, Maram replied, “I want each woman to have the choice to drive, go to college, finish [school], work, and do something valuable with their life; and most importantly, have security.” 44

Conclusion and Recommendations

As long as there is conflict in the Middle East, the demand for research conducted on women living in Palestinian and Iraqi occupied zones will continue to grow because the relations between war, violence, occupation, migration patterns,
and the social role women fulfill will continue to pique academics’ interest. It is important to study women in conflict areas because on October 31, 2000, the U.N. Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security expressed concern that “[c]ivilians, particularly women and children, account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict, including as refugees and internally displaced persons, and increasingly are targeted by combatants and armed elements, and [the international community has recognized] the consequent impact this has on durable peace and reconciliation.” The latter part of this statement—“the consequent impact this has on durable peace and reconciliation”—packs a heavy punch. The Security Council believed without women’s protection, involvement in peace negotiations, and appointment to positions of power, the troubled area cannot achieve peace. Resolution 1325 addressed the adverse impact of armed conflict on women, and recognized that women’s contributions to peacekeeping and peace-building help promote stability.

In the future, I hope to continue my study on Palestinian and Iraqi women and the complexities they face as time progresses. To modify and improve my study, it would have proved most beneficial to conduct additional personal interviews. Because of time constraints, I performed only two interviews—I had the intention of doing twenty. Once I sat down and talked with Ahlam and Maram, their stories and experiences furthered my research and understanding of the Middle East by giving a personal touch to something that seems so far away. When I started researching, I did not realize how hard and time-consuming it would be to locate, contact, and follow up on sources. Often, I found myself tied up in the “run around”; sources would point me to in one direction and I would locate them, only to get pointed in another direction or redirected to the first person I talked to. Further, interviews conducted in the Middle East or heavily populated areas, as opposed to West Michigan, would enhance my research because the amount of potential interviewees and their fresh experiences increase exponentially.

What I have learned from the Palestinian’s sixty-year history is that the Israeli occupation, checkpoints, and blockades have hampered development in the educational, employment, and social sector. Also, the crowded conditions of the refugee camps that have led to the physical ailments and violence against women continue to rise.

Iraqis are facing similar difficulties. American occupation has compromised the security Saddam provided for his Iraqi citizens. Taking from the Palestinian’s sixty-year experience and projecting my findings onto Iraqis, I would suggest the following: First is for policy makers to recognize that Iraqis, men and women, do not make up one monolithic bloc of ethnicities, religious identities, and personal beliefs. Secondly, the provincial Iraqi authority and American forces need to protect and help serve the best interests of women by providing a safe environment for women to voice their concerns, taking into consideration the importance of the role the family plays in Middle Eastern society. Thirdly, increase awareness of the resources available to women as victims of violence and sexual abuse. Fourthly, provide educational services for women and increase awareness of these facilities. Lastly, to implement these recommendations, it is necessary to allocate more funds to successfully run these programs.


