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Seeking Refuge amid Decades of American War against Iraq

> Everyone knows . . . there were no good reasons to destroy the country and to make the people immigrants and . . . kill so many . . . people in Iraq just because of Saddam Hussein and his administration at that time. The country is completely destroyed. . . . I mean, the Iraqi people didn't deserve that.
>
> –Hashim, 1 October 2017

Introduction

The study of displacement and refugee resettlement is also the study of war.[1] Addressing how those who resettle as refugees view belonging and democratic membership in societies of refuge requires first considering the question of what compelled them to leave their homes in the first place. For this reason, it is crucial to examine the connections between the American war in Iraq and the effects that conflict has had on millions of people in that country, in the region, and around the world. The ongoing American war fought against their country forced the individuals who participated in this study to leave their homes and resettle in the United States. As Omar, 42, originally from Basra and now living in the Shenandoah Valley Region of Virginia, told me, for example, "I came here because of the war that I didn't create" (14 December 2017).

The United States has been fighting a war against Iraq for thirty years. Since 1991, its government and military have inflicted massive, widespread, and ongoing harm to the Iraqi people. Conservatively, the American war has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, and many times that number of physical and psychological injuries. Millions have been displaced from their homes, some temporarily and many others permanently. American soldiers and their allies have committed numerous atrocities during the war

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as well, including rape, torture, murder, and massacres. Extensive bombing and battles have caused catastrophic destruction throughout the country. Although many other countries have fought against Iraq during this conflict, particularly the United Kingdom, the United States has led the war since its inception and overwhelmingly caused the most harm.[2]

The US government's justifications for continued violence have shifted over time–stopping Iraqi aggression against Kuwait in 1991, weakening the Saddam regime in the 1990s, liberating the people of Iraq in 2003, and defeating ISIS in 2014. However, beyond the public rhetoric and propaganda campaigns calibrated to gain support for conflict from the American population (Kellner 2004, 1992), the war in Iraq–like so many other conflicts before and since–has been fought to project and maintain American imperial hegemony in the region and beyond (Kumar 2012; Kinzer 2007). The American war against Iraq has been, since its inception, a crime against humanity. The architects and leaders of this war, who have thus far evaded any responsibility for their crimes, must be held to account. Americans broadly must grapple with and make reparations for the immense ongoing harm the US-led war has caused the Iraqi people since 1991 and the mass displacement that was among its predictable consequences.[3] This chapter sketches the violent realities of the US-led war, particularly the 2003 invasion and occupation, without which millions of individuals would still be living in their homes in Baghdad or Fallujah, rather than seeking refuge in Amman, Berlin, or New York.

This chapter begins by establishing the context that the United States, as well-articulated by one of this study's participants, is not a "normal" country; rather, it is an empire that has violently pursued its imperial designs throughout the world, including Iraq. The chapter then explores the thirty-year American war against Iraq, focusing particularly on the harms caused by the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation. That discussion is followed by interviewees' observations concerning the corrosive effects the invasion inflicted on their lives and the lives of millions of other Iraqis. Finally, this chapter explores interviewees' decisions to leave their homes and seek refuge in the United States.

The United States: Not a Normal Country

On 14 January 2018, I spoke with a young man named Abdullah, 28, who lived in New York City at the time of our interview. During our conversation, he said of the United States: "It's not a normal country, it's a superpower country. . . . It's not like a country that is just, interfering inside its own borders. It's a major power" (Abdullah 14 January 2018). His characterization of the United States as a superpower is commonly accepted by those both supportive and critical of its role in the world (Ullman and Wade

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1996; Ó Tuathail 2003; Kagen 2021; Boot 2019). Put more directly: the United States is an empire.

The United States as a political and social formation is a historically and contemporary expansionist and imperialist project, striving to conquer territory, maintain military dominance, and extend economic and cultural hegemony, first in what is now called North America and thereafter around the globe (Brown 1970; Kinzer 2007; Kumar 2012; Immerwahr 2019). According to the US Department of Defense, for example, the United States now operates 4,800 "Defense Sites" in 160 countries located on all seven continents (US Department of Defense n.d.). This includes maintaining eight hundred military bases in dozens of countries (Vine 2015). In comparison, all other countries in the world maintain a combined total of seventy military bases beyond their own borders (Slater 2018).

To maintain and expand its influence and control, the United States has a long and ongoing history of military invasions, covert and overt assassinations, training and funding of paramilitary forces, and coups against other governments. In the decades after World War II, the United States worked to overthrow the governments of Iran, Guatemala, Congo, Dominican Republic, South Vietnam, Brazil, and Chile (Stuster 2013). In the second half of the twentieth century, it bombed and/or invaded North and South Korea, North and South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Panama, Grenada, and Iraq (Kinzer 2007). To enumerate only a partial list of the conflicts it has waged in the twenty-first century, in addition to the war in Iraq described in this chapter, the United States waged a war against Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, participated in the 2011 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) naval blockade and aerial bombardment of Libya, and has fought an air war in Syria since 2014. The United States also supports, funds, and arms the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and its blockade and regular bombardment of Gaza (Sharp 2022). The US military and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) have also carried out large-scale drone assassination programs and air wars in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, begun in 2002 under George W. Bush, intensified under Barack Obama, and continued under Donald Trump and Joe Biden (Guilliard et al. 2015; Scahill 2015). The United States has launched at least 947 drone, fighter jet, and cruise missile attacks since 2002, killing between 4,569 and 6,605 people in those countries.[4] In 2020, the United States deployed special forces to 154 countries, approximately 80 percent of the nations in the world (Turse 2021). Abdullah emphasized his point about the global reach of American power and violence by observing: "[Americans] might not feel it, but whatever decision politically you take, it could affect the lives of millions of other people. . . . It did affect my country and it's affecting other countries. I know it's hard to tell from living here and the media you have. . . . But that decision you make to elect someone, it has a direct influence on other people's lives" (14 Janu-

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ary 2018). It is to the devastating effects of the American war on Abdullah's home country that I now turn. The next section is not a thorough history of the American war against Iraq; rather, it is a sketch meant to demonstrate the character, scale, and duration of the violence of American geopolitical maneuvering and military conflict and the tremendous harm the United States has caused to the people of Iraq.

Decades of American Geopolitical Machinations and War against Iraq

Like the United States, Iraq has a transnational genealogy (Dewachi 2017). Successive imperial powers have controlled and shaped the country as a social and political community–the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire, and most recently the American empire. The movements of people into and out of Iraq's territory have fundamentally shaped and reshaped it. In recent decades, Iraqis have experienced prolonged insecurity and violence under authoritarian and repressive governments as well as multiple, consecutive conflicts. Sarah, 39, an interviewee living in New York City, explained there was a "very bad situation there because before 2003, before the American war, [Iraq] had another war with Kuwait, with Iran, and all the wars affected the people. So, this suffering is not from just 2003. Before, it was very hard for these people to live this destroyed life" (30 November 2017).

The United States has supported multiple repressive Iraqi regimes. It is implicated in all the conflicts Sarah referenced and began interfering in Iraq's internal affairs more than half a century ago. In 1960, for example, the CIA attempted to assassinate Iraqi prime minister Abd al-Karim Qasim (Wise 2009). It then built links with the then-marginal Ba'ath Party, supporting its 1963 coup to remove Qasim. Seeking to purge leftist opposition in the country, the CIA provided lists of Iraqi Communist Party members and their allies to the Ba'athists, which that faction used to track and murder at least seven hundred people (Frontline 2014). The Ba'athists remained in power for the next forty years, with Saddam Hussein rising to the Iraqi presidency in 1979. The American government supported Saddam's brutal regime while it carried out many of its worst crimes. During the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War, for example, the United States provided Saddam with economic aid, battlefield intelligence, and components to build chemical weapons (Tucker 2014). It simultaneously supplied Iran with weapons in violation of an international arms embargo and American law (Cleveland and Bunton 2009). US intelligence provided critical targeting information for Iraqi sarin gas attacks on Iranian forces (Harris and Aid 2013). Saddam remained a US ally throughout his government's genocidal campaign against Iraq's Kurds between 1986 and 1989 (Roth 2004).

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When Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, however, the United States turned on its former ally and led a multicountry coalition in an air war against Iraqi forces in Kuwait and Iraq. The massive six-week bombing campaign that began in January 1991 killed as many as eighty-two thousand Iraqi soldiers and seven thousand civilians (Cleveland and Bunton 2009) and destroyed thousands of buildings (Ahtisaari 1991). The now-infamous "Highway of Death" events demonstrate the one-sided nature of the conflict. As Iraqi soldiers retreated from Kuwait, US warplanes destroyed vehicles at the front and rear of the column of forces before heavily bombing along the highway. Blocked by ruined vehicles, Iraqi soldiers were trapped under the assault. American pilots who participated described the attacks as "shooting ducks in a pond" and "shooting fish in a barrel" (Coll and Branigin 1991). Coalition forces also intentionally and extensively bombed civilian infrastructure in Iraq including roads, power plants, food warehouses, and water purification facilities (Sherry 1991). As Dewachi describes the assault:

> Coalition forces devoted their energies to the strategic destruction of Iraq's physical infrastructure. Aerial bombardment and cruise missiles hammered Iraqi cities for forty days, dropping more than 90,000 tons of bombs. In Baghdad, bridges linking the two banks of the Tigris River were demolished, power stations were destroyed, and water sanitation systems across the country were ruined. Decades of infrastructure work had been undone. For months, Iraqis living in the capital had no electricity, no clean water, and no telephone lines. (2017, 148)

In one instance, American warplanes dropped laser-guided "smart" bombs on a civil defense air-raid shelter in Baghdad, killing two to three hundred civilians. The United States knew the structure had been used as a civilian air-raid shelter during the Iran-Iraq War—and it was clearly marked as such in 1991—yet warplanes intentionally bombed the shelter without first issuing warnings to evacuate as mandated by international law. Human Rights Watch called the attack a "serious violation of the laws of war" (Sherry 1991). A United Nations humanitarian mission report filed in 1991 characterized the level of devastation inflicted by the American-led bombing in the following way: "The recent conflict has wrought *near-apocalyptic* [emphasis added] results upon the economic infrastructure of what had been, until January 1991, a rather highly urbanized and mechanized society. Now, most means of modern life support have been destroyed or rendered tenuous. Iraq has, for some time to come, been relegated to a pre-industrial age" (Ahtisaari 1991).

Wissam, 35 originally from Sulaymaniyah and now living in the Chicago area, argued that Saddam made a mistake when he invaded Kuwait in 1990: "If he didn't do that, maybe Iraq will be even better than Qatar or Kuwait or Saudi Arabia" (22 October 2017). Saddam had ruled a strong centralized

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state; Iraq had a large, highly educated population, a powerful military, and a relatively high healthcare standard (Sanford 2003; Dewachi 2017; Inhorn 2018). Wissam, no supporter of Saddam, said that although there were no political freedoms in Iraq under the Ba'athist regime, "It was the peak state in the area . . . but now, it has the opposite" of those strong social and economic structures (22 October 2017).

During the conflict, more than one million Iraqis sought refuge in neighboring countries, including Jordan and Iran (Public Information Section 2003). The majority eventually returned to their homes. However, in the decade following the conflict, approximately forty-nine thousand Iraqis resettled in the United States (Grieco 2003).

Soon after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the United Nations imposed, and the United States supported and enforced, unprecedented, comprehensive sanctions on Iraq that remained in place until 2003. That sanctions regime, compounded by the destruction of essential infrastructure, shattered the Iraqi health system (Gordon 2010). Lack of food, clean water, and healthcare led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children under age five between 1990 and 2003 (Dyson 2006). Journalist Jeremy Scahill (2018) said of his time reporting from Iraq during this period that "hospitals were like death rows for infants. There were no medical supplies. Birth defects that weren't found in modern medical journals were appearing. Syringes were being reused and hospital floors were being cleaned with gasoline."

In 1996, when confronted with the prospect that sanctions had killed half a million Iraqi children, US ambassador to the United Nations and later secretary of state under President Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright said, "We think the price is worth it" (Mahajan 2001). In 1999, former UN humanitarian coordinator in Iraq Denis Halliday, who resigned in protest of the enormous suffering caused by the sanctions, described these measures as "deliberately, knowingly killing thousands of Iraqis each month. And that definition fits genocide" (Siegal 1999). An "undeclared conventional war" continued between 1991 and 2003 (Anderson 2014, 111). American and British warplanes dominated Iraqi airspace, flying hundreds of thousands of sorties, dropping thousands of bombs and missiles, and killing and injuring hundreds of civilians (Ali 2000).

Shortly after George W. Bush's election to the US presidency in 2000, preparations began for a large-scale escalation of conflict against Iraq. One of Bush's first acts as president was to authorize joint US/UK bombing raids in February 2001 to disable Iraq's air defense network ("US and British Aircraft Attack Iraq" 2001). The administration spent the next two years waging a propaganda campaign to convince domestic US and international audiences that Saddam Hussein presented a global threat (R. C. Kramer and Michalowski 2005; Kellner 2004). Despite unprecedented worldwide antiwar protests (Chrisafis et al. 2006; CNN 2003b) and opposition by

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the United Nations, Arab League, and the European Union (CNN 2003c, 2003a; MacAskill and Borger 2004), the United States and its allies launched a large-scale assault on Iraq on 20 March 2003.

After more than a decade of low-level conflict, the 2003 invasion began a new destructive phase of the war. As Nora, 27 and living in the Shenandoah Valley Region of Virginia, succinctly put it, "The US said that they're liberating [Iraq], but they were invading actually" (6 February 2018). The initial aerial bombardment and ground attack killed more than seven thousand civilians and many more Iraqi combatants defending against the invasion. The US military targeted fifty Iraqi leaders, including Saddam Hussein, for "decapitation" airstrikes during the assault. The initial bombings killed none of those original targets, but did kill dozens of civilians. Although on a smaller scale than in 1991, American warplanes again targeted infrastructure such as the country's media outlets, telecommunications, and the electrical grid (Docherty and Garlasco 2003).

The invaders quickly defeated the Iraqi Army, overthrew the government, and dismantled the state. The Americans and their allies then restructured the Iraqi government and economy, privatizing public goods and resources for the profit of United States and other foreign companies (R. Kramer, Michalowski, and Rothe 2005). A US occupation regime directly ruled the country until June 2004, after which a provisional Iraqi government formed the basis for a newly established parliamentary system. Although Saddam Hussein escaped the initial invasion, American forces captured him in December 2003. Saddam was tried and convicted of crimes against humanity in an Iraqi court and executed in 2006.

Unlike in 1991, the 2003 escalation involved a large-scale military occupation by American soldiers and mercenaries–euphemistically referred to as "contractors"–as well as much smaller numbers of allied forces. Four individuals with whom I spoke–Ahmed, 34, a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) recipient now living in Chicago; Ali, 37, now residing in New York City; Hashim, 34, and living in Chicagoland; and Tariq, 33, now living in Upstate New York–worked with the US government and military in different capacities, such as translators and interpreters, in the years after 2003. The husband of Nada, 57, an SIV recipient now living in New York City, did as well.

Sarah told me that after the invasion there was "No education. No electricity. No stable life. No jobs. The war destroyed the country" (30 November 2017). Nada said of life after 2003 in Iraq: "The situation in Iraq is so, so difficult. . . . During one year in my country, I couldn't sleep. I feel always I'm very scared of everything. Who's knocking on the door? When my kids or my son or my husband went to college or school or his work, really, sometimes when they went, I heard some bombs. I didn't know what I will do at that time" (1 November 2017). Violence in Iraq continues

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today. Conservatively, since March 2003, the American-led invasion and subsequent occupation have killed between 275,000 and 306,000 people, including approximately 186,000 to 209,000 civilians (Crawford and Lutz 2021). Hundreds of thousands more have been injured. These numbers include people killed directly by violence committed by the United States and its allies as well as by anti-occupation forces and groups such as al-Qa'ida and later ISIS.[5] The figures cited here are certainly incomplete; destroyed infrastructure, lack of healthcare, and inadequate food access caused by the invasion have killed as many or more people than these totals. Multiple studies conducted in the years since 2003 have estimated a significantly higher civilian death toll (Hagopian et al. 2013; Burnham et al. 2006; Guilliard et al. 2015).

Since 2003, American and allied bombardment and battles have destroyed tens of thousands of homes, hospitals, mosques, and other buildings throughout the country. In 2004, for example, US forces twice laid siege to Fallujah. On April 1, Marines surrounded the city and launched an assault that killed hundreds of civilians, destroyed thousands of homes, and forced the majority of the city's two hundred thousand residents to flee (R. McCarthy and Beaumont 2004; Rayburn et al. 2019). American and allied forces again attacked the city on 8 November 2004. A US Army Captain who led a thirteen-day tank assault on the city, told *The Boston Globe,* "I really hate that it had to be destroyed. But . . . [t]he only way to root them out is to *destroy everything in your path*" (Barnard 2004; emphasis added). The second assault killed more than one thousand civilians and damaged or destroyed 70 percent of the homes in Fallujah, thousands of businesses, one hundred mosques, and multiple government buildings (Jamail 2012). The siege killed so many civilians that the city's soccer stadium had to be converted into a graveyard (Glantz 2017).

Shelling and bombing from ground and air–first against Saddam's government, then anti-occupation fighters, and most recently ISIS–has repeatedly reduced large sections of major Iraqi cities, including Ramadi and Mosul, to rubble (Sim 2017; George 2016). According to Amnesty International (2017), the US-led aerial assault against ISIS in Mosul demonstrated an "Alarming pattern" of "destroy[ing] whole houses with entire families inside. The high civilian toll suggests that coalition forces . . . have failed to take adequate precautions to prevent civilian deaths, in flagrant violation of international humanitarian law." The massive debris created by heavy bombardment and the use of weapons such as cluster bombs and depleted uranium munitions have left many areas contaminated and polluted with toxic and radioactive materials (Inhorn 2018).[6] Epidemiological studies since have found a correlation between this pollution and significantly increased birth defects and cancer rates among Iraq's population (Busby, Hamdan, and Ariabi 2010; Chulov 2010; Zwijnenburg and Weir 2016).

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Between 2003 and 2011, the United States maintained a large occupying army in Iraq. As Abdullah argued in his interview, "If the military, they go to a civilian place, any military, they wouldn't act nice. They would be rude. They would attack people. They would be aggressive" (14 January 2018). The occupying army battled individuals and groups resisting its presence and policed the country. American and allied occupiers belligerently patrolled Iraqi streets,[7] shooting, injuring, and killing thousands of civilians (Zielbauer 2007b). In the months after the 2003 invasion, American soldiers fired upon crowds of anti-occupation protesters on at least five separate occasions, killing dozens of people and injuring many more (Amnesty International 2004a; Howard and McCarthy 2003; Bouckaert and Abrahams 2003). For example, on 15 April 2003, soldiers fired on demonstrators in Mosul, killing seven and injuring dozens. Two weeks later, on 28 April, soldiers in Fallujah killed seventeen protesters and injured seventy-five others. A 2003 Human Rights Watch investigation into civilian killings by American soldiers found a pattern of "over-aggressive tactics, indiscriminate shooting in residential areas and a quick reliance on lethal force" (Abrahams 2003, 4). A 2007 congressional investigation uncovered a similar pattern among Blackwater mercenaries (House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform 2007). To give a sense of the scale of this violence, the US Army recorded 4,492 "escalation of force" incidents between January 2005 and January 2006. Only sixty-seven instances (1.5 percent of the total) involved anti-occupation fighters; the remainder involved civilians (Rayburn et al. 2019, 548–49). This analysis implies that, in 2005 alone, American soldiers fired on civilians more than forty-four hundred times.

Sometimes US soldiers and mercenaries shot civilians by accident. On other occasions, however, they did so intentionally (Schmidt 2011). American forces have committed numerous murders and massacres since 2003 (ACLU 2007; Schofield 2011; Glantz 2017; Whitlock 2009; Kennard 2012; Chappell 2019b). Some events are well-known; for example, the 2005 massacre of twenty-four civilians in Haditha (Schmidt 2012) and the 2007 killing of fourteen in Baghdad's Nisour Square by Blackwater mercenaries (Neuman 2017). But there have been many other, less infamous, crimes. In May 2004, for example, US helicopters and soldiers attacked a wedding in the village of Mukaradeeb, killing between forty-two and forty-five people, including fifteen children (McCarthy 2004b). As witness and survivor Haleema Shihab told *The Guardian*, at 3 AM "the American soldiers started to shoot us. They were shooting low on the ground and targeting us one by one" (McCarthy 2004a). Consider as well, the "Iron Triangle Murders," one of multiple killings and attempted cover-ups.[8] On 9 May 2006, American soldiers killed four unarmed Iraqis during a raid on an island in Lake Tharthar. The soldiers first shot and killed a man and detained three others, all unarmed. The Americans then released the men and told them to run

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before shooting them, in an attempt to make it look like they had tried to escape (Zielbauer 2007a). In one of the most disturbing known crimes, on 12 March 2006, five American soldiers broke into the home of fourteen-year-old Abeer Qassim Hamza al-Janabi. The soldiers killed Abeer's mother, father, and younger sister before gang-raping, killing Abeer, and setting her body on fire (MacAskill and Howard 2007).

Although the killing of Abeer and her family was shocking in its brutality, US cruelty has been endemic to the post-2003 invasion. In the first year of the occupation, the American military arrested and detained thousands of individuals (Amnesty International 2004b), the overwhelming majority of whom (between 70 percent and 90 percent) were innocent of any crime (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] 2004). US forces in Iraq also engaged in the widespread torture of prisoners (Brody 2004). The most well-known abuse took place at the US-run Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca prisons at which American soldiers beat, sexually assaulted, and raped captives (Taguba 2004). Far from isolated incidents, American forces tortured Iraqis–sometimes to death (White 2005)–in numerous locations throughout the country (Brody 2004). For example, three American soldiers told Human Rights Watch (2005) that they and their comrades at Forward Operating Base Mercury near Fallujah routinely beat prisoners, forced them into "stress positions" until they passed out, and denied them food and water for their amusement. American forces also turned over captives to their Iraqi allies for interrogation, abuse, and torture (Leigh and O'Kane 2010). The American occupation officially ended in 2011. However, more than ten years later, US soldiers remain in the country, although at a much-reduced level.

In reaction to the violence committed by the American forces, the invasion and dismantling of the Iraqi state sparked legitimate armed anti-occupation resistance. It also opened space for intercommunal violence between the long politically dominant Sunni minority and the majority Shi'a population. Importantly, although there are significant theological differences between Sunnis and Shi'a, the intercommunal violence that has plagued Iraq in the past two decades is fundamentally politically driven, rather than religiously (Inhorn 2018). After 2003, sectarian militias formed and recruited Iraqis and foreign fighters to resist the American and other occupying forces (Cockburn 2016). Armed groups pursued their own goals and sought revenge against members of Iraqi society. The United States formed, trained, funded, and fought alongside Iraqi police and paramilitaries. Some of these groups, including the notorious special police commando Wolf Brigade, acted as death squads engaging in widespread torture and killings with US knowledge, if not approval and collaboration (Mahmood et al. 2013). Organizations such as al-Qa'ida in Iraq, and its later offshoot, ISIS, flourished in the chaos of the American war and launched campaigns

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of violence against occupation forces, the new US-imposed Iraqi government, and the population. As Wissam argued in our interview, before 2003 there were "certain people or certain red lines you didn't cross, and you stay safe. Now, you don't know who's your enemy. Your enemy is unseen. [You don't know] who is going to take your house, take your rights. So, it's very hard. . . . Every party has its own militia, and they fight all the civilians who are the victims. And they keep fighting with each other" (22 October 2017). Although the contours and intensity of the American war in Iraq have fluctuated since 1991, it continues. The Biden administration announced an end to the US "combat mission" in Iraq in December 2021 (Burns, Madhani, and Abdul-Zahra 2021). However, given the multiple previously declared ends to the conflict in 1991, 2003, 2011, and 2017, and the continued drone bombings, airstrikes, and special forces raids throughout the region, only time will tell whether the United States will ever fully end its war in Iraq. As explained in more detail below, several interviewees, including Abdullah, Tariq, and Wissam, noted that they had initially supported the idea of removing Saddam from power, only to become disillusioned with the seeming lack of a US postinvasion strategy and in light of the violence his regime's fall unleashed. Hashim alluded to opposition to the invasion, saying, "wars never solve anything. Actually, they make things worse. You saw after the Iraq war in 2003 until today . . . it's completely destroyed" (Hashim 1 October 2017). One individual, Walid, 39, living in Upstate New York, explicitly stated that he was against the war before it began. He said: "We like solving things without violence, without war. In a diplomatic way. We were tortured by Saddam Hussein, but I disagree about the war in Iraq. There's too many other ways. . . . There is no mercy in the war, unfortunately. There are going to be too many mistakes" (Walid 27 September 2017).

During our interview, Kasim, 45 from Baghdad, and now living in Maryland, discussed his view that the Bush administration's prosecution of the war was a "total failure." Bush "just went there and he couldn't do anything," Kasim said, "So, Obama pulled back, pulled out his troops. It made things worse" (27 February 2018). When we spoke in February 2018, he interpreted the Trump administration's renewed engagement as promising to "go back to Iraq, we'll solve the problems, and that's what he did" (Kasim 27 February 2018). Intense US bombing continued through late 2017 and began to taper off in early 2018. At the time of this writing, in mid-2022, airstrikes against ISIS in what is now a cross-border conflict in Iraq and neighboring Syria continue, although at a reduced rate. Approximately twenty-five hundred American soldiers and forty-five hundred Department of Defense Contractors remain in the country, supporting Iraqi forces as they continue to battle ISIS (Schmitt 2021; Deutsche Welle 2021).

Three individuals with whom I spoke, Hashim, Marwa, and Ali, said that Americans occasionally apologize to them for the harm caused by the war.

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When this happens, Hashim observed, he responds, “it’s not your fault, don’t apologize . . . it’s just politics. It’s not the people” (1 October 2017). Marwa, 48, and now living in Upstate New York, explained: “Some people, they say sorry. They know what it’s like there when they attacked, when the American army attacked Iraq and that’s why we are here. Some people, and they are veterans, they say sorry. . . . I say no, don’t say sorry. Saddam Hussein, he was very bad. I’m not a person who liked him. I’m happy when they took Saddam Hussein out. I was so happy” (25 November 2017). Ali said that when Americans find out he is from Iraq, “not all of them, but most of them,” tell him they are sorry, “we ruined your country because of a false war” (14 January 2018). “I feel happy when I hear that,” he said, “because if my country didn’t have war . . . I wouldn’t be here, you know?” (Ali 14 January 2018). The following section further explores the ways in which, according to many of those I interviewed, the 2003 invasion shattered Iraqi society.

The War’s Corrosive Effects on Iraqi Society

The majority of those with whom I spoke described how the American invasion and toppling of the Iraqi government precipitated the social, economic, and political breakdown of Iraqi society. Chaos ensued in the wake of the invasion and overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime. While life had been difficult under Ba’athist rule, toppling the Saddam regime left a vacuum of basic state services and eroded the minimal safety that had existed before. Trust between individuals and communities began to fracture, militia and paramilitary groups flourished, and foreign fighters entered the country. Militias fought against both the occupation of the country by foreign armies as well as other members of Iraqi society as intercommunal violence spread. These groups, most of which were unknown in Iraq before the invasion according to interviewees, terrorized the country’s population.

Iraqi society is composed of individuals from myriad diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. Many Iraqis lived in heterogeneous communities and coexisted relatively peacefully before the 2003 American-led invasion (Crane 2021). According to Marwa, for example, in Iraq before 2003, people of different religious backgrounds, such as Christians, Muslims, and Yazidi interacted with each other: “My neighbor, she was a Christian. . . . I celebrated with her, she celebrated with me” (25 November 2017). Sarah too noted that there were multiple communities living together in Iraq prior to the invasion, including Muslims and Christians. She said when she was in school, many of her friends were Christians. Tariq said that Americans are surprised when he tells them “We have Christians in Iraq” along with many other religious groups, some that do not exist in significant numbers in the

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United States (2 November 2017). In Iraq, Tariq had friends from multiple religious backgrounds, and those differences were not a source of tension. For example, if he, a Muslim, invited his Christian friend to a religious celebration, his friend would "never tell me: 'No, Tariq, I can't. I'm Christian.'" Rather, he would respond, "I'm coming!" (November 2017). After the 2003 invasion, militia and other violent groups targeted minority populations, causing significant numbers of Iraqi Christians of various denominations to leave the country for refuge abroad (Sassoon 2009).

Moreover, Kasim offered the insight that although many different groups have lived together in Iraq for millennia, relations between them have not always been peaceful. Kurds in Iraq, for example, have long struggled for political and cultural autonomy and suffered from repeated military assaults during Ba'athist rule (Marr and Al-Marashi 2017). Kasim compared the situation in Iraq in 2018 to that of Iraqi Jews in the 1940s and 1950s. "Our parents or grandparents didn't talk about it, [but] now . . . we are suffering exactly what they suffered" (Kasim 27 February 2018). Jews were "part of society and they had all the rights, just like ours. And it's their country, they've been there for thousands of years. We should give them the opportunity to come back. We should prepare the society to accept them again" (Kasim 27 February 2018). In the early 1950s, the majority of Iraqi Jews, one of the world's oldest Jewish communities, emigrated under increasing threat by the Iraqi government in the wake of the 1948 creation of the State of Israel (Shiblak 2005).

Kasim went on to say, that Iraq "has to be a tolerant society to everybody. . . . It's a mosaic of different cultures" (27 February 2018). However, as he explained, successive minority groups have been "oppressed or pushed out" throughout Iraqi history (Kasim 27 February 2018). "And then the Christians now, the Yazidis. In every time period there've been one of the minorities being subject to some kind of discrimination," he said.

The American war did not create the cleavages and tensions in Iraqi society. However, its destruction of the Iraqi state created a situation that allowed sectarian violence to flourish. In addition to producing the conditions that led to violent conflict between Sunni and Shi'a militias (Marr and Al-Marashi 2017), ethnic cleansing of Iraqi Christians in the first decades of the twenty-first century, and ISIS genocide against Yazidis in the 2010s (United Nations 2021), the violence and instability created by the American war and its aftermath eroded education and employment opportunities and persistently threatened the personal safety of Iraqis of all backgrounds. Nearly all interviewees spoke at least briefly about their experiences during the conflict. Some expressed their views concerning the US invasion and ensuing occupation, offering a range of perspectives. A particularly salient thread that appeared across the interviews was the ways in which the 2003 invasion created instability and violence throughout the country.

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Sarah, for example, spoke about the postinvasion intercommunal violence committed by Sunni against Shi'a and vice versa, based on group identity. As she explained, this ongoing violence had caused "Too many people from Iraq to escape to go to another state, because some people don't like this situation. . . . Many people, not just me" (Sarah 30 November 2017). She noted that common countries of resettlement included Australia, Sweden, and the United States.[9] Her brother left Iraq and went to Germany, while other relatives had resettled in Sweden and Turkey. Sarah and her sisters left Iraq to find a safer situation in Syria, remaining there for eight years before relocating first to Arizona and later to New York City. I asked her whether she had a choice of resettlement country when she applied with the United Nations in Syria and she said, "Actually, no. I told them we wanted to go to London because my uncle lives there. Maybe he could help me and my sisters. But the UN told me it doesn't work. It's very hard. [The UN sent] me and my sisters here, to America" (30 November 2017).

The ongoing war in Syria began while she was there, and she witnessed conflict unfold in her home country as well as her society of refuge. In Iraq, "Sometimes we see this situation in front of my eyes," she said, "some people died and me and my sister, when you see this, we'll be crying, and I can't sleep" (Sarah 30 November 2017). "We escaped from Iraq, we went to Syria," she continued: "I saw the bad situation there also when the war started. . . . I heard the warplanes, up in the air. We saw the school, high school near to my apartment, it exploded. . . . Many people were afraid and scared. We see the same situation, from Iraq to Syria. It's very hard. . . . It's still hard. We remember that and still, I am too afraid of the plane, the warplane. The sound, I can't sleep"(Sarah 30 November 2017). Sarah also explained that she believes both Iraqis and Americans have suffered because of the war: "The American people, some families, lost maybe the husband, the father, the brother or the son because of the war. I see on TV, too many American people that suffered from this. It's not good. The war, it's not good for any country" (30 November 2017).

Similarly, Nada explained how stressful the conditions in Iraq were before she and her family decided to leave. If her husband or children were late coming home from work or school, she worried they had been kidnapped. She said: "And I told you why we are coming here: for my husband and for my kids. I wanted to have more safety. And I wanted to sleep. Really" (Nada 1 November 2017). Nada's husband worked for an American company after the invasion and, at one point, she found a note in her garden at home that read: "You should go now. You should leave now" (1 November 2017). Those threatening her life because of her husband's work left a bullet with the letter. "What can we do?" she said, "Of course, my kids and my husband are very important for me, this is my family. So, we decided to come here [to New York City]" (Nada 1 November 2017).

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Nora explained that she has a mixed background. "I'm coming from . . . Kurdish and Arabic," she said, "And then, part of my family is Sunni and part of my family is Shi'ite. That makes it harder for me to adjust to the whole conflict back home. That was one of the things that I got threatened because of. It's like, you cannot hate your own family" (6 February 2018). She continued to elaborate on the threat she and her family faced: "My whole family was threatened by the two parties, the Sunni and the Shi'ite. We got kidnapped, my brother got kidnapped twice. My dad got kidnapped. And I was threatened to be kidnapped, to get killed actually, to be honest with you. I'm quite sure. Because I was in two different families, Sunni and Shi'ite and I cannot support one of them against the other because they both are my family. Like my sisters, my aunts, and my brothers-in-law, so, I got rejected" (Nora 6 February 2018).

As Hashim argued in his succinct summary of the invasion that serves as the epigraph to this chapter: "Everyone knows . . . there were no good reasons to destroy the country and to make the people immigrants and . . . kill so many . . . people in Iraq just because of Saddam Hussein and his administration at that time. The country is completely destroyed. . . . I mean, the Iraqi people didn't deserve that. This is something that is just not fair" (1 October 2017). For Hashim, the consequences of the invasion began in 2003 and continued up to late 2017 when we spoke. In his words:

> You saw after the Iraq war in 2003 until today . . . it's completely destroyed. Everybody now, they want their parts. The country is becoming divided. . . . We have ISIS in Iraq. We never heard about these kinds of terrorist groups. We never had them in Iraq before. We used to live in Baghdad, we were really a very successful community. We have schools, we have universities. We studied, we had very good education, and we had very good entertainment places, everything we had. Now everything is destroyed. We have the worst education. We have the worst healthcare. . . . It's just not fair. (Hashim 1 October 2017)

Because of the invasion, Hashim said, "We were never able to plan for anything in Iraq. Even if I planned for two years or three years and then something happened in that city, either war or conflict or anything it will completely destroy all our plans" (1 October 2017). Hashim's parents still live in Baghdad, and he said: "I would really, really love to go back to them, to live with them." However, "at the same time . . . we cannot do anything there. It's just very hard to plan, to set a future for your kids" (Hashim 1 October 2017).

Tariq asserted, "In 2003 if you were there, and you saw how the United States, the Marines, and Army came, everybody welcomed them. You will say: 'We didn't know that Iraqis, they love the United States. They have no problem with us'" (2 November 2017). During the war, he joined the

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American Marines as a translator because, as he argued, "we want to, people like me, they think that if the US they came to help us, we should help ourselves" (Tariq 2 November 2017). However, his attitude changed. "The turning point," he said, came when "you [the American government and military] left everything open to . . . al-Qa'ida. They moved into Iraq. This is the point that I started to believe the United States, they did a really bad job with us, and they killed us" (Tariq 2 November 2017).

Abdullah said it was difficult to determine whether Iraq would have been better off without the 2003 invasion. "Because," he said. "We had a problem with the regime. . . . He [Saddam] was a dictator. There is no question about that. . . . You had no freedom in Iraq. Ok, you were safe. You had basically, barely you had food. But you had no freedom of speech. You could not say anything about politics. So, I believe that the regime should have changed" (Abdullah 14 January 2018).

However, despite those conditions, Iraq was better off in some ways before the invasion, in his view. For example, echoing Wissam, he said, "Iraq was much stronger, our education was good. . . . We had a good reputation in the countries, we had our place within the countries of the world. . . . People respected us" (Abdullah 14 January 2018). Nevertheless, the negatives far outweighed these perceived positives for Abdullah, and he was convinced that the regime needed to change, although not in the way the United States accomplished it. As he observed:

> I would say that if there was something else other than the war . . . if you could have changed the regime without having all the circumstances that happened after, consequences, I think that would be a perfect solution. But the way the USA did it, I think it was a disaster. Because I believe that the people who were in charge at that time, the American administration, they had very poor knowledge about Iraq and the Iraqi people. (Abdullah 14 January 2018)

The American war "made Iraq a total mess," Abdullah said: "And it made Iraqis pay for that until this day. Like, it has been what? Fourteen years? And we still have violence, we still have a lot of corruption, a lot of killing in Iraq. If the people in charge had been aware of what's going on in Iraq, we could have avoided all of that" (14 January 2018). Considering his analysis of the repercussions of the war, he said:

> If you were [to ask me whether I was] with or against the war in Iraq based on the results that we are having right now, I would say 100 percent I'm against it. But maybe if you asked me . . . in 2003 if I was with or against the war in Iraq, I would say if you would bring knowledgeable people who were actually trying to help Iraq and who are trying to implement a system and they have a plan after the regime falls . . . I would say, yeah. I wouldn't say a war, because at the end of the day I don't like the facts of the war. But maybe there's another solution. So, unfortunately, that thing happened, and it was a huge

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> mess and I'm shocked, really to know that people who were in power at that time had this poor knowledge about Iraq. It was a complete mess. (Abdullah 14 January 2018)

As we continued our conversation on the American invasion, Abdullah added that there were a few positives after the war, although he did not name any specifically. He began to say "freedom of speech" before stopping himself and noting, "You can't say really freedom of speech because yeah, on paper, you have freedom of speech. But there are a lot of militias and if you say something, you know you are at risk" (Abdullah 14 January 2018). Therefore, Abdullah concluded, "some people they got advantages from the war. And others, which is the majority of the people, their lives completely got destroyed" (14 January 2018).

"I was one of the lucky ones," he said, "I think I got lucky to get a scholarship" (Abdullah 14 January 2018) to travel to the United States for college. (I describe this in more detail in the following section). He went on: "If it was during the Saddam regime, I wouldn't have got it. So, in terms of career-wise and education-wise, I got lucky to get it. And I feel, actually, guilty to get that thing, because there are millions of other people who cannot go to school. So, I got that good thing . . . from the war. But at the same time, I cannot see my family. So, it's half, half. But in general, it was bad. The war was bad for a lot of Iraqis. And there are thousands of people who got killed, completely innocent people. And I don't think people should support decisions that will lead to killing a lot of innocent people" (Abdullah 14 January 2018).

Wissam expressed similar views on the conflict. In the period leading up to the invasion, "we were really pro it," he said: "Because . . . I was born under the Saddam regime, and I was thinking of leaving even before he was thrown out. So, it wasn't that pleasant. But the problem was, we trusted the US government, they know what they're going to do after that. After that now everybody says: 'Oh we wish we could go back to Saddam's days'" (22 October 2017). Although there were no political freedoms under Saddam's rule, "to some extent it was peaceful," he said, "There was no ISIS, there was not that ethnic fighting. There was not this corruption. The infrastructure was really good. . . . It was very secure because nobody can even steal a car, or the government will kill him" (Wissam 22 October 2017). "We were safe at our houses," Wissam reiterated (22 October 2017). However, he said, "There was no money. That was the hard part. Because there were economic sanctions in Iraq. . . . Now, we got the money, you can't do anything with it. You don't feel safe at your house. You don't feel safe. There is corruption from the smallest employee in the government to, maybe, the Prime Minister" (Wissam 22 October 2017). Wissam concluded: "I left in 2005. I think it would be very hard for me to go back and adapt to that situation" (22 October 2017).

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Finally, Ali related several stories about himself and his family to illustrate how dangerous it was after the 2003 invasion. Like many Iraqis his age, he worked as a translator with the US military during the occupation, which made his life in Iraq increasingly difficult (Campbell 2016). "We started to get threats at home," he said: "'You are helping the invaders. . . . Your brother is working with them.' Whatever. So, our life became difficult over there. Even our travel, our commute. Because . . . there were a lot of militia groups at that time on the ground. From different sides . . . from Sunni and from Shi'ite. I don't want to say only Shi'a or only Sunni. For me, I'm a Sunni person. But it happened a lot. And they started to kill interpreters and put a note on their chest. So, we decided to flee" (Ali 14 January 2018).

The incident that precipitated his decision to leave Iraq involved his brother's narrow escape from death. At the time of the incident, Ali's brother Abu Bakr was a college student studying to be a veterinarian. As Ali shared:

> So, he's going to his college and encountered a checkpoint. They are stopping cars and asking for IDs. The checkpoint was run by a Shi'a militia. So, they asked about his ID and he gave his ID. They said: "Abu Bakr? Okay Abu Bakr, step out of the car please." At that time, I have also newspaper reports, these militias used to kill according to names. Omar, Abu Othman, Abu Bakr. Those three names are top for them. They start to kill them and cut their head off and put their ID on their chests.[10] . . . So, my brother was smart. On the other side of the road . . . there was an [American] convoy coming, my brother speaks English. So, he stopped them. "Stop them! They are going to kill us according to our names. I'm seeking your help!" he shouted. (14 January 2018)

Because Ali and Abu Bakr's father held a position with the Iraqi Foreign Ministry under Saddam, Abu Bakr had spent time in the United States as a teenager. As Ali recounted:

> My brother . . . was here [in New York City] in 2001 and 2002. He had his ID from high school, from New York . . . so he showed the American soldier. He [the soldier] saw Manhattan . . . my brother explained to me, he said he felt like I am one of them; "They cannot abandon me." So, they went to the checkpoint, they stopped the line, they stopped the cars, they stopped the traffic. The checkpoint appeared that it wasn't authorized by the Ministry of Interior because they made calls. And then they put them down on the ground and they cuffed them, and they took them. And they stopped the car and they said to my brother and his two friends, "Go back, take them to the nearest point, to their home." After that, we said then "that's enough." I fled my country in 2006. (Ali 14 January 2018)

Ali left Iraq shortly after this incident, but his brother stayed. However, looters occupied their family home during the war, forcing Abu Bakr to move. Ali's father had collected antiques from around the world during his travels for work and had amassed a library of books. "This is his life," Ali

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said, "30 years of working and traveling" (Ali 14 January 2018). But, as Ali demonstrated with his fingers, all of this was gone in a snap.

Ali punctuated his description of the breakdown of Iraqi society after the invasion with a final example:

> A criminal used to go and steal cars, steal from homes and he was in prison for 3 years. That was before the war. . . . He got caught in one of my friend's houses. . . . After he went to prison. Then . . . during the war all of the prisons [had prison breaks]. . . . This guy started to take revenge on the people who made reports to the police. My friend was one of them. And he went to their house seeking money or their life. They had to choose. So, they gave the money. After two months, my friend got killed by the same person. (Ali 14 January 2018)

These incidents were illustrative for Ali. Reflecting on the war, he said: "When you remember what happened to you, to your sister, to your brother, to yourself. And then how people changed all of a sudden after that war. There was one person [Saddam Hussein] holding the law and holding everything together in one hand. When he was gone, everything went upside down. When you think about it, it's ruined. The country is gone. It's torn apart. There is no law to protect you. And you go to the police station [the officer would say]: 'What can we do? We can't do anything'" (Ali 14 January 2018). Ali left Iraq and first went to Jordan. "Jordan was too difficult," he said, and "then I went to Syria. In Syria, I opened a small translation office to help immigrants and refugees during the Iraqi crisis. . . . It went [approximately] two years and 7 months. After that, I went to Egypt, and I stayed in Egypt five years till I came here [to New York City]" (14 January 2018). Ali's comments provide a segue to the next section, which provides the principal reasons interviewees shared for why they chose to leave their homes and seek refuge in the United States.

Deciding to Leave: Seeking Refuge Abroad

Millions of Iraqis were displaced from their homes during the conflict because of US military action, fear of militia groups, and deteriorating living conditions. Sassoon (2009) has argued that the initial response by the United States government to growing violence in Iraq and concurrent displacement was to pretend the problem did not exist and hope it would go away. Fewer than one thousand Iraqis arrived in the United States as refugees between 2003 and 2006. The figures fluctuate widely by year thereafter, but between 2007 and September 2017 an average of 14,500 Iraqis immigrated to the United States each year (Refugee Processing Center 2019). The Trump administration drastically curtailed refugee resettlement. At the time of this

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writing, the Biden administration has promised a return to pre-Trump levels of admission, but full implementation of that policy is still pending.

While myriad factors contribute to leaving one's home, as interviewees explained, becoming a refugee entails a decision, and often a series of decisions, that together prompt a person to seek safer or more stable conditions elsewhere within their country or beyond. Many of those with whom I spoke indicated that they left Iraq in response to the deteriorating living conditions there. As described above, Nada, for example, explained that she and her family faced threats because of her husband's work with an American company in Baghdad. Life in Iraq after the invasion was "very, very difficult for us, for my family" (Nada 1 November 2017). She was afraid for her safety and that of her husband and children and, ultimately, that concern resulted in her decision to leave Iraq.

Many interviewees confronting similar conditions first fled to neighboring and nearby countries such as Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt before immigrating to the United States. Some had applied for resettlement in multiple countries, including Australia, Canada, and Sweden, before deciding to go to the United States. For this reason, these decisions, which unfolded for individuals across months or years, are best conceived as processes, rather than discrete single-time events.

For example, Hashim's relocation choices entailed multiple stages. He lived originally in Baghdad and worked for both the United Nations, and later the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). In 2006, he decided to move from Baghdad to Erbil, a city in the north of the country in Iraqi Kurdistan. There, the physical danger was lower, and he found meaningful and well-compensated employment. Nonetheless, he decided to apply for the Special Immigrant Visa Program in 2014:

> The decision was very difficult to take. I applied for the SIV program. I traveled in less than a year, in ten months. And then it went very quick. I wasn't expecting that . . . because it takes years for many people. With me, it took only ten months until I received my visa . . . and it expired within three months, so I had to travel within 3 months of . . . when I received it. So, it was a really difficult decision to take. I had so many friends living in the United States, and everyone was telling me different things depending on their experiences and their backgrounds and everything. So, I didn't have a very clear understanding about life in the United States until I arrived and then we made the decision and we decided to travel. But now I would say it was one of the best decisions I've made in my life. (Hashim 1 October 2017)

Walid, who came to the United States through the United States Refugee Admissions Program, narrated his experiences leaving Iraq in the following way:

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> I came to the US in 2008 as a refugee. I'm a US citizen now. . . . I was a middle school teacher in Iraq, a business owner in Iraq when the war started. I worked sometimes to interpret with coalition forces, the American army there. . . . Also, we established a nonprofit organization for human rights. We weren't successful at that because we did not have protection from the government. We lost family and friends because of that reason, which made me feel unsafe, so I moved to Syria before the war in Syria in 2006. We lived a very good life there. A Syrian family helped us and supported us. (27 September 2017)

Walid and his family were among the more than one million Iraqis to seek refuge in Syria before and after the US invasion (Harper 2008). Like his friend Walid, Mohammed, 38, and now living in Upstate New York, went to Syria and was displaced twice over. As he put it: "Before I came here, in Iraq, we had a civil war, and it was terrible. I lost my two brothers, my father, and a lot of friends because [of the conflict]. I decided to move to Syria and Syria started a civil war in 2011, so we came here. . . . When I had the interview with the UN, they asked me if you have friends in America. I gave Walid's name so they brought me here too . . . so Walid can help me" (Mohammed 2 November 2017).

Becoming a refugee can entail identifying and seeking out opportunities to change one's circumstances. Wissam left Iraq in 2005 to study in Jordan. When Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, replacing George W. Bush, Wissam heard acquaintances in the US Army say that the new government planned to withdraw its soldiers from Iraq to focus on the concurrent war in Afghanistan: "At first," he said, "we didn't believe that because they spent billions and billions of dollars there. But after that turned out to be true, things started to collapse there, so it was not safe for us to stay" (Wissam 22 October 2017). So, he and his family decided to emigrate. The university in Jordan where Wissam studied had an American campus, and he received a visa to go to the United States for his graduation ceremony. Originally, he intended to come for the commencement events and then return home. However, while in the United States, he decided to seek asylum.

Wissam's experiences also speak to the complexity of "refugeeness" and the overlapping legal regimes one might pursue to find a safer place to live. He and his parents received asylum, first coming to the United States and then making their request. His wife applied for and received a visa through the Special Immigrant Visa program. Several members of Wissam's family also resettled in different parts of the United States by leaving Iraq for a second country before applying for refugee status through the United Nations and the United States Refugee Admissions Program. Wissam's family's experiences illustrate that individuals apply for the programs for which they may qualify, and pursue whatever opportunities they can identify, to ensure their safety.

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Like Wissam, Nora applied for asylum after arriving in the United States. In Baghdad, she had worked as a lawyer at a women's organization providing pro bono legal services. In what ended up as her final case, she represented the wife of a powerful militia leader as that woman sought a divorce and legal protection for herself and her son. As the case proceeded, the husband threatened Nora and her coworkers. Indeed, at one point, he came to Nora's home and handed her a bullet telling her he would kill her if she returned to court. Later, militia members came to her house looking for documents related to the case. As Nora explained: "He put papers on my door. They put a sign on my house like a red cross on my door. . . . They [militia] were everywhere, you know? And I had an incident before that. My dad got kidnapped and it's like they know us, somehow. I don't know. So, I said: 'There's no way to go back'" (6 February 2018). So, she "left everything, I left my office, I left this organization" (Nora 6 February 2018), and her home and moved in with a friend before applying for a visa to the United States to visit her brother in Ohio. After she arrived, she petitioned for asylum. Looking back at these events, she said, "I got past this whole thing, it was very horrible. . . . It was so hard to lose everything. To lose my house, everything in my life was there. I am starting all over here from zero and it is so hard" (Nora 6 February 2018).

In a final example, Abdullah first left Iraq for Syria and applied for and received refugee status there. While living in Syria, he heard about a nonprofit organization that facilitated a program that offered refugees the opportunity to come to the United States to pursue higher education. In late 2008 or early 2009, Abdullah applied to that program, even though he did not read, write, or speak English. He asked a friend to assist him with the application. He received a call from the program organizers, who told him, by way of his brother who could converse in English, that language proficiency was required. They asked Abdullah to sit for an English proficiency exam, on which he scored a "0." Thereafter, he decided to dedicate himself to learning English so that he could apply again: "I kept studying for three months straight from my room," he said (Abdullah 14 January 2018). His efforts led to scoring two levels higher than necessary for the program when he took the exam a second time. He applied to the scholarship again and was successful, receiving a visa to go to New York City to attend a local university in 2010. The examples explored in this section have demonstrated the multiple paths individuals take to resettle in the United States, weighing options and pursuing possible routes to safer conditions.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the destruction caused by the American war against Iraq and the displacement and resettlement of approximately 172,000 Iraqis

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in the United States that followed in its wake. As argued at the outset, the planners of this war must be made to face justice for their crimes, and Americans need to acknowledge and make reparations for the enormous harm the US government has inflicted on the people of Iraq. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that Americans have not developed a serious, critical recognition of the ramifications of this conflict. Consider an interaction Nora described with an American in Virginia, who could not clearly recall the 2003 invasion:

> I have met people who don't know where Iraq is. Literally, a lady . . . asked me about my accent . . . and she's like: "Where is that Iraq?" And I was very, very, very depressed and I was like: "Where is *that*?" I told her: "Do you know the Middle East?" She said: "No." "Do you remember 2003? George W. Bush had a war on a very, very small, dumb country claiming that they had a nuclear weapon?" She said: "Oh, I don't know why, but I remember there was a war, the United States was part of it." I was like: "I am that small dumb country. . . . So, do you know where that is?" And from there, that was the last time. I was like: I need to calm myself down and not be nervous about people asking me where I am from. Because I get very nervous, especially when I see the ignorance.[11] I was like: "Your country has been in two wars, and you don't know why these people are coming in?" We are coming in because we're fleeing the war. (6 February 2018)

This encounter is illustrative of a broader lack of adequate engagement and self-reflection among Americans concerning the devastation their military has caused in Iraq for three decades. A 2018 poll conducted by *HuffPost* and YouGov found, for example, that only 34 percent of respondents remembered the Bush administration's justifications for the invasion of Iraq "very well" (YouGov 2018). Twenty-eight percent of those surveyed reported that they "don't remember" whether they supported the war in 2003. Only 33 percent indicated that they had supported the war in 2003, despite contemporaneous polls suggesting that more than 60 percent of Americans supported invading Iraq.[12]

Much more work needs to be done to build broad recognition among US citizens that they have an urgent responsibility to make reparations for the war against Iraq. Considering the incredible harm caused to the people of Iraq, it is critical that Americans reject as fundamentally illegitimate asserted claims that the United States has a right to remake other societies through violence (Anderson 2014). Significant work must be performed by activists, scholars, and teachers to expand Americans' ethical and political imaginations beyond the deeply rooted notion that violence is necessary and well-intentioned when committed by the American military (Immerman 2010). By rejecting the assumed legitimacy of American geopolitical violence, it is possible to seek alternatives to war and conflict that can build more peaceful relations between people (Jackson 2019).

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The next chapter examines interviewees' experiences living in the United States after resettling. It explores their interactions with Americans and perceptions of belonging in the society amid widely circulating discourses portraying Arabs and Muslims as irreconcilably different and dangerous. It also elaborates on the opportunities many have found to interact and exchange with native-born Americans and fellow newcomer friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

Notes

1. Portions of this chapter have been adapted from Keyel 2020.
2. The United States contributed the most forces to the conflict beginning in 1991. While other governments sent soldiers to Iraq in support of the 2003 invasion and occupation, the United States military and American private mercenary forces have led the war. Although the United Kingdom was the principal US ally and second-largest force in Iraq in 2003, the scale of its engagement peaked during the initial invasion in March 2003 with forty-six thousand troops, compared to 145,000 American soldiers. By May 2003, the UK troop level had fallen to eighteen thousand and continued to decline until British combat operations ended in 2009 (BBC 2011). Although the United States has caused the most harm, the UK and other countries that have attacked Iraq must also be held accountable for the harm they have caused.
3. American and British intelligence agencies anticipated the consequences of the conflict before the invasion. Declassified US National Intelligence Council documents written before the 2003 invasion outlining the anticipated consequences of a US military attack on Saddam Hussein's government estimated that a US-led war and occupation of Iraq would increase "popular sympathy" for terrorist objectives in the short term; groups like al-Qa'ida would attempt to exploit the war by ramping up their "anti-US operations"; and neighboring states would "jockey for influence" by fomenting strife among Iraq's multiple ethnic and religious communities (Pillar 2003b, 5–6). One million Iraqis had been internally displaced in conflicts in Iraq prior to 2003, and these intelligence reports included estimates by the UNHCR that an assault on Baghdad would displace nine hundred thousand persons internally and create 1.45 million more refugees (Pillar 2003a). The British Joint Intelligence Committee also predicted that launching a conflict against Iraq would increase the threat of terrorism and communicated its assessment directly to Prime Minister Tony Blair before the invasion (Chilcott 2016). All the predicted consequences, ignored by the Bush White House and Blair at the time, unfolded as forecast.
4. Until 2020, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism extensively tracked and kept an up-to-date count of American drone strikes and covert actions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. That accounting can be found at https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war. The work of conflict tracking passed to *Airwars* in 2020: https://airwars.org/.

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5. As the aggressor states, the United States and its allies are responsible for the immense human suffering caused by their war against Iraq, including the death and destruction directly committed by their militaries, the violent resistance to occupation, and the resultant rise of groups such as the Islamic State.
6. The United States extensively used cluster munitions during and after the 2003 invasion. Such weapons have been widely condemned, and in 2008 outlawed by 102 countries under an international treaty (Human Rights Watch 2017), because they cannot distinguish between combatant and civilian targets. When fired, cluster bombs release thousands of smaller munitions that litter the area of attack. A percentage of each payload fails to explode on contact, essentially leaving behind a minefield that can injure and kill for years after. As Human Rights Watch reported in December 2003, cluster munitions killed and injured hundreds of civilians in the first months of the conflict (Docherty and Garlasco 2003). For example, Dr. Sa'ad al-Falluji, director and chief surgeon at al-Hilla General Teaching Hospital, told HRW that 90 percent of war-related injuries treated at the hospital between March and May 2003 had been from cluster munitions. That experience was indicative of the form of injuries that occurred all over the country. According to HRW, the heavy use of cluster munitions in populated, residential areas by the United States and its allies "represented one of the leading causes of civilian casualties in the war" (Docherty and Garlasco 2003, 85).
7. For example, in January 2004, Army Sgt. 1st Class Tracy Perkins ordered soldiers under his command to throw two Iraqi men into the Tigris River as a deterrent against looting. One of the men drowned while the second was able to swim ashore and escape. Perkins was tried and sentenced to six months in military prison for this crime (Roberts 2005). Sergeant Perkins also faced charges for allegedly pushing another Iraqi off a bridge near Balad the previous month, in December 2003. According to testimony of a former Irish Guard Captain at an inquiry into Iraqi casualties, "wetting"–the practice of throwing Iraqis suspected of looting and other petty crimes into waterways, rivers, and canals–was commonplace among British occupying soldiers (Cobain 2016).
8. For example, American soldiers massacred eleven people in the town of Ishaqi on 15 March 2006. After a firefight, American soldiers entered the home from which they believed shooting had originated. They gathered eleven individuals, five children, four women, and two men, and executed all of them (Schofield 2011). A helicopter gunship then bombed the house, destroying the evidence. American soldiers were cleared of responsibility in this case (White 2006). However, documents released by *Wikileaks* in 2011 revealed that autopsies conducted after the attack indicate the victims were handcuffed and shot in the head (Schofield 2011). The following month, on 26 April 2006, American Marines entered the home of a fifty-two-year-old man with a disability, Hashim Ibrahim Awad, bound him, dragged him outside, and shot him in the head multiple times. Seven US Marines and one Navy medic were convicted and jailed for this crime (Glantz 2017). Navy medic Melson Bacos, who pleaded guilty to the crime, testified that after shooting Awad, a Marine planted a rifle and shovel to make it appear as if Awad had been involved in setting up a bomb when he was

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killed (CNN 2007). A third incident with a similar modus operandi took place in spring 2007. American soldiers arrested four Iraqi men in Baghdad on suspicion that they had attacked occupation forces. The detained men were handcuffed and blindfolded before American soldiers shot all four in the back of the head and then dumped their bodies in a canal (Whitlock 2009).

9. Sweden accepted significant numbers of Iraqis for resettlement in the first five years after the 2003 invasion. By 2009, as many as forty thousand Iraqis had joined established Iraqi communities throughout Sweden (Sassoon 2009). Sweden, a country of ten million people, has proportionally resettled ten times as many Iraqis as the United States.
10. In 2006, *The Guardian* reported a rise among Sunni Iraqis in Baghdad changing their names to be less identifiable and forging identification indicating they were Shi'ite. In one incident, Baghdad police uncovered the bodies of fourteen young men all named Omar who had been shot in the head and left in a garbage heap by a militia (Beaumont 2006).
11. Reinforcing Nora's interpretation, in 2015, *Public Policy Polling* asked Americans whether they would support or oppose bombing Agrabah, the fictional Middle Eastern city from the Disney film *Aladdin*: 30 percent of Republican and 19 percent of Democratic voters said they supported bombing this fictional city. Trump supporters were the most likely to support, at 41 percent (Jensen 2015).
12. Similarly, a 2015 YouGov poll found only 38 percent of respondents reporting that they supported the war in 2003 (Frankovic 2015).

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