Living with Faith for Now:
Journey of Iraqi Refugees Between Homes

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for graduation with distinction in the Department of
Cultural Anthropology of Duke University
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ABSTRACT

Many refugees from around the world have witnessed and experienced violence in their communities, causing them to flee to a new country. Iraqi refugees have been displaced to neighboring countries, such as Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. Though in exile, memories of the past linger and contribute to the ongoing challenges in the host community. People cope in different ways, and this thesis examines how Iraqi refugees in Egypt heal and re-imagine a world during displacement. Using life-story interviews from Iraqi refugees in Egypt, in addition to field-site observations in Jordan, Amman and Durham, North Carolina, I argue that faith offers moments to heal and re-imagine better futures. The interviews suggest that faith is derived differently for male and female Iraqi refugees. Female Iraqi refugees discussed faith in terms of outwardly religious expression and community, such as the Quran, mosque, hijab, and collective prayers. Male Iraqi refugees, however, described their faith as a “feeling” or a personal relationship between themselves and Allah. Though faith precipitates out of different behaviors and activities, Iraqi refugees in Egypt cling onto their faith to keep imagining better worlds. They keep working, and as evidenced by latest encounters with the Durham refugee community, they keep migrating, hoping that they will, one day, discover a safe, comfortable life that makes sense to them.
Dedicated to Iraqi refugees displaced all over the world.
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**INTRODUCTION: “I WILL MAKE IT”**

How was my life in Iraq? Oh—I had the perfect life. 2 maids, 2 cars, 20 European trips, 3 plots of land. We had the money, so life was, well, easy, you know? Then, well, you know the story. Life became not so perfect. The war started, father died, political issues began to change, we were forced to leave our home, husband married a second wife, I gained 150 pounds, sons changed their names and, and....oh, you want to know more about my husband’s second wife? No, no— that’s not the story I want to tell.

I refuse to settle down. I refuse to give up. I am only 58 years old—this is not old in your country. I will make it and I will give my children the lives that they deserve.

--- Noor, 6th of October City, Egypt, March 2013

I sit in the dimly lit Cilantro’s café, eyes and ears fixated on Noor. The café plays the Quran on its speakers, and Noor’s story falls in cadence to the rhythmic structure of the soothing verses. I take notes, but her vivid images and lucid stories of her past need no inscribing: her story will forever linger with me. The barista comes around for the third time asking about our order, and my partner, Jack, orders a cappuccino and water for the table. Noor tells us once more that there is nothing on their menu that will please her diabetic tongue. She orders a sugar-free orange juice to appease the waitress. She closes her eyes, and I notice her beautiful eye makeup, which matches her tan hijab and matching tan outfit. I look into eyes that have seen so much violence, and wonder how they still remain beautiful and serene. I find solace in them. I feel safe. But I also feel responsible. I will carry her words back to my home in America. To my dorm at Duke University. To my community that opens its arms as I open my heart. Her words were shared with me, and now my words aim to share Noor’s story and some of the other stories I heard during that one month in Cairo, Egypt in 2013.
Noor shares bits of her life with us, from her childhood in Iraq to her unstable transition to Egypt. But Noor’s story is not an isolated one. Though she has witnessed so much violence and hurt, she imagines a better future, wherever it may be. Noor’s image of a better future intrigued me, especially since I am a student of global health and anthropology. Her unwavering hope allowed me moments of healing, even if temporary. Considering Noor’s story, I wanted to understand how the Iraqi refugees I interviewed were able to cope during displacement. My interviews guided me to faith as a method of healing, and that is what I explore throughout this thesis.

I was able to meet and listen to many refugees in Cairo, Egypt in 2013 and later in Amman, Jordan and Durham, North Carolina in 2014. These experiences have molded my personal and academic trajectories and have afforded me opportunities to understand the implications of institutions, policies, and laws on cultures, identities and well-beings. Though this thesis draws heavily on the interviews I conducted in Egypt in 2014, I also draw on experiences that have informed my understanding of exile, survival, and faith. From my personal background as a daughter of Arab immigrants to a student of mental health and refugee issues, these next sections will attempt to recreate the inspiration for this research.

**From the Nile to the Mississippi and back**

Because of my family and our cultural history, the Nile will forever be the emblem of my life, but it’s the Mississippi River that has been the backdrop to much of my life’s story. Dad came to the US in the early 80s, hungry for a new home. Egypt was not good to him anymore, he would always tell me. Dad loved learning, but there were powers beyond him
that shortchanged his abilities. “You have to know someone to get somewhere,” he always told me.

There are over 10 million Egyptians living in the over-populated Cairo, a 200-square mile city. Opportunities are reserved for individuals with special connections, either familial or political. Dad believed that his life could be built elsewhere. He had faith that his future would be better than his present. To be able to achieve his dream as a chemical engineer, dad decided to come to the US to get his master’s in chemistry. With a degree in hand, he received offers to work in New Mexico, Chicago and Mississippi for Magnetek, a chemical plant producing wires. Dad knew very little of New Mexico and Egyptian films didn’t depict Chicago in the most positive light. So he picked Mississippi, home of the Blues, William Faulkner, and a lot of other things we’re not so proud of.\(^1\)

Mom did not come to the US until a year after her marriage in 1985. The US embassy refused to give her a visa until she fulfilled their requirements, which included mountains of paperwork and months of waiting. This murky and unclear bureaucratic process didn’t make sense to her. Neither did the next 30 years. Mom came soon after dad moved to Mississippi, and she’s despised every day since. Unlike my dad, she knew little English and had no American friends. She did not know how to drive, and even if she did, there was nowhere to go. Crystal Springs had few stores, and neighbors were separated by fields. Mom wasn’t used to a quiet life—after all, she spent her entire life waking up to 5 adhans in her neighborhood\(^2\). So mom waited until people started to enter her life.

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\(^1\) Mississippi is home to many challenges, such as pervasive racism, lack of medicaid expansion, and high rates of HIV and chronic diseases.
\(^2\) An adhan is the call to prayer for Muslims. It is usually said by a mosque leader on a loud speaker phone for everyone on the block to hear.
There weren’t many Muslims, let alone Egyptians, so mom eagerly welcomed people from the community into her life. A distant neighbor, Mrs. Bonnie, befriended mom during her first year and took her to the First Baptist Church so that mom could help her with the preschool, which ultimately strengthened her English. Once my sister and I entered her life, we became her lesson plans. We were a team, conquering math, English and the colloquial “street” language together. By the time I entered school, she was a part-time teacher at a preschool. Though the language barrier was disappearing, the cultural barrier became more visible. Mom started to wear the hijab when I entered school. When I asked her why she chose to wear it she said, “I got married, had kids, so it was time that I got closer to Allah.” I asked her if perhaps the idea of Egypt and “home” influenced her decision. “Maybe,” she said. “Maybe wearing the hijab made me feel Egypt would always be with me, but I still think that my closeness to Allah was the primary reason.” At every parent-teacher conference, choir show, play, and awards ceremony, mom was there, proudly wearing her hijab. It never bothered me as my 6-year old self only saw kindness and happiness in our world. However, at old, my naiveté went away as 9/11 began the process of attacks and marginalization. At 9-years old, I never felt so uncomfortable in my own skin.

Before meeting myself, my peers—and parents of my peers—likely never met someone who identified as Muslim. In fact, the city’s high school officially accepted black students only in the 70s and only three years ago the major church in the city still refused to marry an African-American couple. The minority out of power, the non-whites, are actively fighting the majority in power for a chance to be heard. As my family was the minority of the minorities, we tried to reduce our differences as much as possible. A “race roll call” is a recurrent memory of this. The first day of class each year, the teacher would
call out perceived races (there were only 2 or 3) and students would raise their hands. Every single year during elementary and middle school, I waited for an Arab, Egyptian or Middle Eastern category. However, “other” was the best I got. During fourth grade, I tried to challenge what others thought of me and raised my hand when Mrs. Wilson, the homeroom teacher, called out “white.” Mrs. Wilson, along with 30 other students, stared me down as if my skin had become a highlighter that brought all the attention to my differences. But, for that moment, I tried to train my peers to see me as someone else.

According to the US Census, the “white race” includes anyone with origins from Europe, the Middle East or Africa. The addition of the categories of Arabs and North Africans came only after a fight from Christian Syrians and Lebanese immigrants in the mid 20th century. The US began to deny non-Western immigrants citizenship during the 1900s. Christian Arab immigrants began to publically and legally fight for admission into the US by using religion as evidence of their rights. Over a century later, Muslim Arabs have become subsumed into this category. To my fourth grade class, however, historical and political jargon was beyond their scope of empathy, so Mrs. Wilson corrected my “mistake” and marked me as “other.” In addition to telling classmates that “I’m not black or white—I’m yellow!” and that there was more to Egypt than pyramids and mummies, I had to explain my religion in a way that makes sense to my peers. Mom helped me do this as she trained me to speak in comparisons, similes and metaphors: “Islam is peace. A Muslim is just like a Christian, really. We can't eat pork, but neither can Jews or Hindus!” I was never—we were never—able to experience religion without linking it to things people could relate to. If I wanted to explore facets of Islam, such as prayers and Quranic stories, I often did this in my own space at home. Because it often felt that I left my religion at home, religion became
something that I did rather than something I felt. I often tell myself it was for the best. I am now a stronger, more independent individual because of the heightened segregation, discrimination and marginalization we experienced. It is through this double consciousness, as described by DuBois, that I learned how to see life. But I often wonder what it’s like to grow up in a community so familiar—and so comfortable.

While my parents were voluntary immigrants, refugees who leave to save their lives face similar challenges of integration. There are several distinctions that set Iraqis apart from Egyptians and other Arabic-speaking countries. Every country has its own colloquial language. Though the formal language is Arabic, there are five main origins of Arabic dialects: Egypt and Sudan; Arabian Peninsula; Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine; Iraq; Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Thus, when Iraqis are in Egypt, they are singled out by their accents. Radwa and Janna, two Iraqi women I interviewed, told me they feel like they are “eaten” in the streets because they are Iraqi. Like my family in the US, there are cultural imprints that leave refugees marginalized, such as mom’s hijab, dad’s accent, and our darker complexion.

Fast-forward 15 years and here I am, a senior at Duke University. My family still lives in Mississippi, though now 10 miles up the road in a new city. Mom and dad have switched roles now: Dad is retired and mom is a full time math teacher in the city's only public school. They still don’t meet many Arabs, and the closest mosque is still 30 miles away. We celebrate the cultural aspects of Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter and the 4th of July with our community, simultaneously celebrating Ramadan, Eid al Fitr, and Eid al Adha.

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3 There are many reasons for the breakup of dialects, with colonialism being a significant factor. Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya were colonized by France, so much of the dialect is French-influenced.
at home. Discrimination and marginalization are still frequent guests in our narratives, but forces of education, religion, family and community have helped me find meaning in my life. Dad’s job, too, introduced us to the privileges of a white-collar job. Most of my friends are white Christians and I’ve adopted many of their traditions in my own life. It’s easier for my siblings and me. We were born here. Mississippi is and will always be home. Egypt will remain on the backburner as long as mom, dad and my siblings are here in the US.

But the same can’t be said for my parents. Dad and mom had to negotiate their identities. Their tongues were trained to articulate every syllable of the English alphabet. From some ways, they tried to reduce their differences, hoping to blend in the community. Though they both have US passports, they do not identify as Americans. Mom has high hopes for returning. “Egypt is my history—my country, my family, my childhood, my youth. All my history is there,” she said. Dad, well, he never wants to fully return. His dream is to spend most of the time here, returning to Egypt for only 1-2 months. “I love Egypt, it will always be home because of family. But it’s hard living there. Here, it’s easier,” he told me confidently.

Despite their differences, they spend most of their free time clinging to anything Egyptian. Al-Masraya [The Egyptian] is an Egyptian news channel that starts and ends everyday. Viber calls from family members in Egypt go off as often as our landline. The smells of molakhaya and dolmas, traditional Middle Eastern food, always fill the house. And Facebook. Mom spends several hours a day liking, sharing, commenting, posting and searching. She does everything she can to bring Egypt here until she can go to Egypt.

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4 Ramadan is one of the 5 pillars of Islam, which is a month-long fast from sunrise to sundown. Eid al Fitr is a holiday of feast celebrated the day after Ramadan and Eid al Adha is holiday of sacrifice, celebrated 70.
Like my mom, several Iraqis in Egypt discussed ways to re-connect with Iraq. Akram, an Iraqi father of three, uses Viber every week to contact his daughter and friends in Iraq. “I miss them so much,” he emotionally told me. Yusuf tells me that it’s much easier to connect to Iraq than before. In 2005-2006, 5 minutes cost you 5 Egyptian pounds. Now, the Internet makes it much easier and cheaper to contact loved one.
From Duke to Egypt

Call it luck. Or call it fate. But, considering my Arab, immigrant background, there was something particularly fitting about the first research opportunity I found at Duke. I met Noor, and many other Iraqis, through Duke Immerse: Uprooted/Rerouted, a semester-long, extensive research program that allows students to delve deeper into refugee issues. The semester’s courses were especially relevant to my understanding of the situation, which included courses on ethics, global health, anthropology and policy. Then six of us went to Cairo, Egypt to conduct life-story interviews with Iraqi refugees. Duke Immerse, operating out of the Kenan Institute for Ethics, supported our research in Egypt, and helped us present it to the Duke community in the form of monologues. My monologue chronicled Noor’s journey from Iraq to Egypt, which was presented at the beginning of this thesis.

While in Egypt, I partnered with Jack Stanovsek, then a freshman, to interview Iraqi refugees. Jack and I spent hours together listening to stories, meeting with organizations and observing the field. There were many differences that set us apart: he was Australian and I was Egyptian; he spoke no Arabic and I spoke the Egyptian dialect; he was a male and I was a female. These differences precipitated out in the interviews as Iraqis would open up differently to us—some feeling more comfortable with Jack and others opening up more to me. There was also one Iraqi translator that assisted us on all of our interviews.

The interviews lasted anywhere from 1 to 4 hours. During the one-month research trip, Jack and I conducted 15 interviews with Iraqi refugees living in Cairo, Egypt. The interviews were set up by two Duke Immerse professors, Suzanne Shanahan and Nadia El-Shaarawi. Professor Shanahan is a sociologist, ethicist, and Associate Director for the Kenan Institute for Ethics. Doctor El-Shaarawi is a medical anthropologist and a postdoctoral
fellow at the Kenan Institute for Ethics. Both have dedicated many years to studying the
effects of forced migration on refugees’ well-being. Because of their continued connections
from previous research, we were able to get many interviews with Iraqis, which led to us
having more connections in Egypt. All of the refugees we interviewed were from Baghdad,
identified as Sunni, and had a means of sustainable income in Egypt. Thus, I must consider
my limited perspective, given that I was not able to meet Iraqis who lived outside of
Baghdad, identified as Sunni, or from a lower socioeconomic standing.

In addition to the 32 interviews our Duke team collected in 2013, two other
research teams collected life-stories. In approaching this thesis, I consulted all these data,
relying heavily on the interviews my team collected. The format of each interview was open
and conversational, leaving room for the individuals to share as much—or as little—as they
preferred. Jack and I met interlocutors at either their house or a nearby café. If we met at a
café, Jack and I offered to buy a drink. However, if we met at their house, Jack and I were
often surrounded with hospitality, ranging from tea and cookies to full course meals. We
started each interview with introductions about ourselves and our purpose in Egypt. As I’m
Egyptian, I usually gave a little more information about my family and where in Cairo we
are from. This made me feel more comfortable as I was able to be open with them before
they opened up to me. Formalities followed, which included anonymity preference and
interview recording. Most of the individuals we interviewed were eager to get their stories
published, eager to have their voices heard. Many refugees even requested a copy of the
recording and transcript, which we gladly sent. Interviews were often with entire families,

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5 There were two main cafes we regularly used: Cilantro’s and Starbucks.
providing us with a wide source of responses and perspectives. The interview-turned-conversation included five basic questions:

1. Can you draw a picture of your home?
2. Can you describe 5-7 significant activities in your life?
3. What are your daily activities?
4. Describe your community and social network.
5. Describe your religion, faith, morals or beliefs.
6. How is your physical and mental health?
7. If your life were a book, what would it be called?

In addition to the interviews, we also collected data and observations from several focus group meetings. The women in the Iraqi refugee community frequently host social events with food and music, which culminate in a more serious discussion about the issues they face. We attended 3 focus groups while in Cairo and met many of the women that we ended up interviewing. Because these focus groups included only females, Jack was not allowed to enter because he was a male. This afforded me an opportunity to learn about the struggles and challenges refugee women face once displaced, discussions that were both uninhibited and powerful. Lastly, we visited several organizations that serve the refugee communities in Egypt, such as the UNHCR, IOM, Caritas, Refugee Legal Aid, St. Andrews Refugee Services, and the Psychosocial Services and Training Institute. These organizations provided me with institutional, humanitarian, and legal lenses to the refugee situation.

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6 These focus groups proved to be important as I returned to Durham and reflected on how to best support, empower and engage with the refugee community in the US; hence SuWA!
7 A description of these organizations is found in an appendix.
From Egypt to Jordan

My interests in refugees did not end with Duke Immerse. The following year, I joined Bass Connections, a Duke research team studying the implications of displacement on mental health. This research experience allowed me to look into the refugee situation in Jordan. With a population of 6.5 million, Jordan is much smaller than Egypt. However its participation in the refugee situation cannot be ignored. Over half of Jordan’s population is of Palestinian decent, many from the 1948 exodus from Palestine. Jordan has also absorbed many other refugee groups, such as Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans. During our 10-day research trip, we interviewed Iraqi and Syrian refugees while meeting key refugee organizations. Other than size, Jordan also differs in wealth when compared to Egypt. In Jordan, 1 US dollar gets ¾ of a Jordanian Dinar. In Egypt, 1 US dollar gets about 7 Egyptian pounds\(^8\).

Jordan has a growing refugee camp issue, while all refugees in Egypt are urban refugees. While in Jordan, I noticed that most of the urban refugees came from various wealth levels. Some seemed to be financially comfortable as they have established businesses and careers. In fact, the two major hotels towering Amman are owned by Iraqi foreigners. However, I also met Iraqis who were living in disadvantaged conditions. One of my interlocutors, Ammar, invited us to his home, which was in the basement of a prosperous villa in a wealthy neighborhood in Amman. His room was really the heater room, which included the furnace and barely enough room for his small makeshift bed and an electric stove. The toilet was a bucket and a hose connected to the wall. The paradox of Ammar’s home is the basement of this affluent home jolted me awake to the subliminal

\(^8\) In terms of US dollars, an average meal in Jordan cost me about $10 while in Egypt in cost about $4.
bureaucratic actors in refugees’ lives. Because refugees are not permitted to work in Jordan (or in Egypt), they often go to extreme measures to find jobs. And natives benefit off of these measures, providing refugees with unused space for monthly rent or free labor. Ammar told me that this was common as most of his friends live in the basements of wealthy families.

**From Jordan to Durham**

Because of my experiences in Jordan and Egypt, I returned to the US determined to do something to introduce Americans to the refugee situation, while empowering and supporting refugees in Durham. So Maura (a Duke Immerse classmate) and I co-founded SuWA, acronym for Supporting Women’s Action and Arabic for “togetherness.” Inspired by the focus groups in Egypt, SuWA started off as a community organization that empowers refugee women in Durham, NC through classes and focus groups. We decided to start with refugee women because they are especially vulnerable. Because of children, the welfare system, and societal customs, female refugees are more likely than men to remain inside the home. Women experience a disproportionately higher rate of domestic violence and, as a result of their often-limited social and communication resources, face many challenges in accessing services.

The organization has grown from 4-5 refugee women to over 30 in just one year. SuWA encompasses many activities that encourage female empowerment and mobilization. Our most recurrent activity is the weekly language course. Refugee women are paired with a Duke student to work on individualized language lessons. Some are preparing for the General Educational Development (GED) test, while others are working to take the driver’s license exam. In addition to the language classes, SuWA women also meet
once a month to give voice to the challenges they experience in their communities and collaboratively seek solutions to mitigate them. A common challenge is financial instability. To address this, SuWA established “SuWA Skills,” a cooperative between the SuWA tutors and women. SuWA Skills brings together female students interested in entrepreneurship, cross-cultural interaction, and community with SuWA women who are eager to start small enterprises with unique skills brought from their country. Many of these refugees come from financially independent backgrounds and had flourishing careers before they were forced to leave their countries. This motivated the creation of SuWA Skills, which focuses on providing eyebrow and facial hair threading to the Duke and Durham communities. The two women spearheading this initiative were beauticians in Iraq. Supported by grants and the Kenan Institute for Ethics, this cooperative provides income to refugee women while providing female Duke students with entrepreneurial and business skills.

From the weekly classes and monthly group discussions to the latest business venture, SuWA has been one of my proudest moments at Duke. It instilled in me an interest in social justice and showed me what unwavering advocacy, collaborative thinking, and mobilized action can produce. It helped me realize the power that a woman’s voice should have in society, and to not only accept the power that she’s given, but to fight and advocate for the power she deserves.

**To Heal and to be healed**

This thesis explores how individuals heal and how they participate in the “recovery of the everyday, resuming the task of living and addressing the future,” (Kleinman and Das 2001: 4). Coming from war torn areas, many refugees, like Noor, have personally confronted threats, violence, and even the death of loves ones. By the definition set by the
DSM-IV, these stressors trigger posttraumatic stress disorder and other trauma-related mental illnesses. The DSM, and international counterpart ICD, lay out fixed descriptions for various illnesses and specific ways to recover from them. My interactions, however, challenge these widely accepted labels and distinctions of trauma, mental illnesses and recovery. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt observed, “The moment we want to say who somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying what he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him ...with the result his specific uniqueness escapes us,” (2013: 181). The term “refugee” has evolved to specific identities, and these identities have homogenized histories and experiences. Television news coverage and aerial images of refugee camps produce knowledge about refugees to the uninformed world (Fair and Parks 2001). Humanitarian aid and media often work together to dehistoricize refugees and place them in homogenous groups (Malkki 1996). Refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general (Malkki 1996: 378).

Recent literature in many disciplines, especially those supported by biomedical models, describe refugees as victims of psychological trauma, therefore, needing medical attention. However, trauma is not a universal concept and should not be assumed for all refugees who have experienced or witnessed violence. It is ultimately the way one interprets negative events that causes one to suffer (Lewis 2013). This notion of suffering and coping motivated my study and led me to scholarship that dealt with violence, coping, memories, and narration.

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9 The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric Association, offers a common language and standard criteria for the classification of mental disorders
10 International Statistical Classification of Disease and Health Related Problems
**Violence**

Historically, anthropologists have studied violence most in “tribal zones” (Nagengast 1994: 112). In many societies, violence was encouraged for many reasons, such as trade benefits and religious gatherings (Nagengast 1994). For warfare, scholars hold the argument that violence is encouraged to execute a goal, such as state, nation, political, or hegemonic violence, and usually oppressed people experience the most hardships (Nagengast 1994: 113). Because many anthropologists cannot be in the field, they “know what they know” through narratives of violent acts (Deeb and Winegar 2012). Violence can be sudden, like the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or it can be gradual through a “continuous reign of terror” (Das and Kleinman 2001:1). This reminds me of Zaid, an Iraqi man I met in Egypt, who describes his life as a “constant terror.” He always fears someone is searching for him, so he moves quickly from one place to another. Political violence works to break up communities, and despite the horror that unfolds, people learn to live, to survive, and to cope. Violence reconfigures space, as seen by Palestinians in an intifada (Allen 2008). Violence also impacts the identity-making process and constructions of masculinity and femininity (Nelson 2009).

**Coping**

Medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman discusses the aftermath of political violence. At some point, he says, people have to rebuild. He argues that violence is experienced and dealt with differently depending on the community. Science and medicine’s “quick fixes” will not suffice. In an interview with Anthropology News, Kleinman said, “People’s lives are much more complicated... These universal approaches have some consequences that often make things worse,” (2002: 28).
Most of the Iraqi refugees left Iraq in 2006. Though they are no longer in Iraq, memories of Iraq continue with them. Whether relinquishing any connection to the past or re-incorporating elements of the past into their present, people cope with violent events differently. Working with pro-life activists, Carol Maxwell examined individuals’ activism when coping with the deaths of loved ones (Maxwell 1995). She found that imagines continue to imagine the death of loved ones years after the incident. To try to cope with the liminal position in the camps, refugees in Kenya participate in the economic market, although financial support is low (Oka 2014). Russian refugee families coped by immersing themselves in education (Delgado-Gaitan 1994). Female refugees from East Germany cope with their loss of jobs and professional status by organizing public events and re-experiencing themselves as able professionals (Touval 2005). Tibetan refugees do not cling onto events that led to their exile. Rather, their cultural practices encourage “letting go of distress rather than holding on to or solidifying it,” (Lewis 2013: 318). While family and religion are important to many, economic and social participation are crucial for others who attempt to cope. I explore this through the thesis, considering faith’s role in coping.

Narration

Since few authors can be present during violent events, we tend to rely on other forms of “knowing.” For my journey of “knowing,” I gathered life-story interviews. Interlocutors pieced together events in their life to make a story. As a result, they were making sense of an experience and imposing order on otherwise disconnected events, creating continuity between the past, present and imagined worlds (Ochs and Capps 1996). When thinking about imagined worlds, interlocutors often brought in ummah, an Arabic word meaning "large community." As a Muslim, I share a global ummah with my Muslim
sisters and brother in Palestine, Egypt, France and China. For my family, our *ummah* strengthened when we went to the mosque on holidays (Eid al Fitr and Eid al Adha). Though we do not know most Muslims in Mississippi, seeing the mass of Muslims praying ahead of you made me realize that I’m a part of something greater than myself. It’s this collective feeling that brings me back to Mississippi every year for the holidays. Many of my Iraqi interlocutors placed their Muslim identity before their Iraqi or Arab identity, which suggests that they, too, engaged in this notion of *ummah*. Unlike my family, however, seeing masses of people praying is not new to them.

*Memory and Histories*

This ethnography is deeply concerned with the process of memory-making. Creating identities that fit memories has been examined (Moench 2006). Memory-making is important because it can shape the future. It also allows individuals to place their life in a way that makes sense to them. Sometimes, it adheres to the beginning-middle-end timeline, but as I saw in my interactions with Iraqis, each story's structure is unique to the individual.

Das and Keinman state, “The recovery of the everyday, resuming the task of living (and not only surviving), asks for a renewed capability to address the future” (2001:4). One can shape the future by addressing the past and learning how to in-corporate it into the future. For many Iraqis, memories were the vehicle through which to get their voices heard. In order to re-build a society, one tries to find a voice in community with other voices (Das and Kleinman 2001:4). This process of memory-making “restores a sense of place to the experience of displacement that violence inflicts in people’s lives,” (Riano-Alcala 2002: 276). When gathering histories of people, authors Das and Kleinman show the tremendous
tensions between competing truths (2001:5). They suggest anthropologists should pay close attention not only to the content of the narratives but also to “processes of their formation within local communities,” (2001:5). In doing so, anthropologists are also looking at the context in which these narrations unfold.

Learning about myself through others

Though I entered research to learn more about refugees, I discovered much about myself. The points of commonality, challenges as strangers in a new land, may have motivated me to join Duke Immerse and Bass Connections, but it’s really the points of differences that have sustained my continued interest. Unlike my family, refugees who have been displaced do not have a choice to return home. That is not an option because home is not adorned with cheerful memories and friends and families. It’s plagued with images of violence, war and death. Refugees cannot return “home” because it does not exist anymore. So they find protection in a second country or a third country. They are trying to recreate new lives in new countries, but unlike my father, they often come in untimely periods of their life with little support from family or friends. Because of this, they experience aspects that are different to immigrants.

This thesis is divided into three main parts. The first part, titled “Un-making a world,” contains two chapters. Chapter 1 places the Iraqi refugee situation in a global context. Chapter 2 brings in the voices of my interlocutors to give nuance to the more mainstream geopolitical narrative of the Iraq War. They discuss the events that shattered their worlds. Part II titled “Re-making a world?” also has two chapters. Though both chapters discuss how faith is involved in coping with loss and re-building worlds, it is divided into the male-centered interviews and female-centered interviews. This was done
because I noted significant differences in the way male and female refugees discussed their experience in Egypt, especially regarding faith. Part III concludes by briefly discussing my interactions with the refugee community in America, and pulls the previous four chapters together. I have separated the different parts of this thesis by articles I have written for the Duke campus newspaper, *The Chronicle*. These articles highlight the personal battles and thoughts I’ve had during my journey at Duke. Guided by the voices of Iraqi refugees, this thesis allows us to understand how they cope, heal, and re-make their lives after experiencing and witnessing violence.

This is the first intertext in my thesis. Throughout my journey to discover the answers, I embarked on a parallel learning experience. These are moments I “plugged out” of the classroom and “plugged in” to my thoughts. These columns afforded me an opportunity to reflect on my experiences and translate them so that the world could reflect,
too. This intertext is about my experience in Jordan with Bass Connections. I had just come back from a research trip studying the effects of displacement on well-being, and was grappling with the way we were talking about refugees.

**Living in refuge**

March 16, 2014

Imagine yourself on a flight’s standby list. You’re stuck in a liminal period that is predetermined by some higher power—“some” being the key word, because you really have no idea who this higher power may be. This feeling of betwixt and between leaves you plunging for any opportunity that will lead you to the front of the line. And even then, it’s not guaranteed that you’ll get a seat.

Now imagine instead of a seat, you’re plunging for food, water, medications—you’re fighting for the basic items of survival. And these items are not only for you. They’re for those who have managed to escape the turbulent lands with you.

I heard this analogy on my research trip during Spring Break. I traveled with my Displacement and Mental Health Bass Connections team to Amman, Jordan to dig deeper into some key refugee issues that are often overlooked. This afforded me the opportunity to meet key stakeholders and organizations that shape refugees’ trajectories. This also afforded me the opportunity to realize that the way we’re talking about refugees is hurting our research and, more importantly, hurting the millions of people who have been involuntarily displaced.

We numb our conversations, drowning our words in a pool of political correctness and prestigious rhetoric. (Although, let’s be real, we shouldn’t turn to politics for correctness.) We place a shield around our conversations so that only those with similar backgrounds can participate. Our bodies have become desensitized as we have trained our mouths to sing the songs our media exudes on repeat.

While these discussions place us one step ahead of those who remain oblivious (read: ignorant), we miss an important part of the conversation: humanness. Refugees are people who have histories, memories, families, love, relationships, heartbreaks, careers and dreams. And just like, us, students, they want futures. By privileging the voices of refugees, we learn so much more than any textbook or article can tell us.

I grew as a student of mental health, displacement and behavioral issues during one of the conversations I had with refugees in Amman. Refugees can recall the exact corner near their home where a best friend was killed or the market where a brother was kidnapped or the street where an explosion killed hundreds of community members. A lot of refugees have no desire of returning to their motherlands, even though those are often the only lands they’ve ever known.
These memories don’t dissolve, and it takes more than politicians to pose solutions. Refugee issues transcend all disciplines. Leaving them out of our discussions is leaving out an important part of the story.

Let’s put the obvious disciplines aside and look at some less discernible fields that are influenced by, and influence, refugee studies. Economics is one. At millions of dollars a year, refugee camps are financial burdens to host countries. But there are more to refugees than refugee camps. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that over half of all refugees are urban refugees. While in Amman, I learned that two of the city’s largest hotels are owned by Iraqi refugees. These hotels are focal points of the city and welcome tourists, and their money, from all over. While many camps still exist, Palestinians now make up about half of the Jordanian population. During my visits to various organizations, I met lawyers, professors, doctors and directors of nongovernmental organizations who are of Palestinian descent. And let’s not forget about the refugees’ influence on us here in Durham, N.C. Sondos Taxis was started by an Iraqi refugee and now employs over 15 refugees from Iraq and Sudan. Discounting these stories from our discussions and studies is not accurately representing Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, refugees, the hotel industry, the taxi industry, the Duke experience or the financial successes of economic systems.

Anthropology is another discipline that grows with refugee studies. Ethnographic research is an essential tool because it allows us to understand how others constitute themselves in society. It’s only then that policy reform can capture the nuances of different refugee populations and develop effective programs. We see this through mental health services, which call for a solid understanding of interpretations and current resources before proposing any intervention for refugees.

Medicine, global health and bioscience are other avenues that push researchers to the next level when studying refugee issues. It allows students and researchers to combine their backgrounds with effective, innovative solutions that place them outside of the box that a textbook prescribes.

These last two years, Duke has given me the opportunity to interact with and understand refugee issues in Egypt, Jordan and North Carolina. But it takes more than a handful of students and professors (many thanks to the Kenan Institute for Ethics) to change political discourse. It’s not always about repatriation or caveats in the system—it’s about the mothers, the children, the doctors, the fighters. It’s about the students who, too, want a college education. It’s about the pregnant mothers who are dodging the damaging effects of a failing healthcare system. It’s about the men and women whose economic successes go unheard. It’s about the stories. And it’s about how we develop and integrate them into our lives.

My ode to all students: listen, learn, and grow. Because our educational trajectory is for more than us. Our educational trajectory is shaped by and is for so, so many more than us.

Leena El-Sadek is a Trinity junior. Her column runs every other Monday.
Picture of Amman during my Bass Connections trip in 2014
PART I: UNMAKING A WORLD

SHATTERED LIVES, SHATTERED WORLDS
Part I addresses the events that happened before the Iraqi refugees I interviewed were displaced to Egypt. I start with a contextual background of the global refugee situation then I focus on the Iraqi refugee situation, highlighting the different armed actors present in Iraq. I also trace the US’s involvement from the First Gulf War during the George H.W. presidency, to the US invasion in 2003, during the George W. Bush presidency. I emphasize the similar discourses of “liberating” and “freedom” used during both presidencies. I challenge these stories through historians and scholars who have studied some of the underlying motives of the invasions. I also challenge these motives in Chapter 2 as I drew on my interviews. These interviews reveal that the US did not “liberate” the Iraqi people. Rather, the US was a major contribution to the violence Iraqi refugees experienced and witnessed.
Chapter One: Repeating histories

51.2 million displaced people.
33 million internally-displaced persons (IDPs).
17 million refugees.
21 host countries.
1 world.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) produced these jolting numbers at the end of 2013. Staggering as they are, they are not new to the refugee narrative. People have been displaced and uprooted for centuries, yet it was only six decades ago that the world decided to address this growing reality. The UNHCR was created by the UN in 1950 to protect refugees worldwide\(^{11}\). The UNHCR then produced the 1951 Refugee Convention, which defines a refugee as someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." As a result, there are some 51 million registered people (and many more unregistered) worldwide who have been uprooted, with little chance of returning home.

The UNHCR resettles less than 1% of refugees from the Arab world, including Iraqi, Syrian, Sudanese and Palestinian refugees. Refugees from the Arab world leave their home countries mainly because of all out war and political and religious persecution. Iraqi refugees, like Noor, were forced to leave Iraq because of the aftermath of the US invasion. Clashes erupted between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, although other minority groups, such as Christian and Yazidi Iraqis, are also affected. There are about 4 million refugees from Iraq, and most have moved to Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. These are not official

\(^{11}\) Ironically, the UN makes decisions for individuals not recognized belonging to a nation, such as Palestinians and Rohinygas.
resettlements overseen by the UNHCR but “transit countries” that place refugees in a liminal position of ‘betwixt and between’ homes. Once in the transit country, refugees must carve out their new lives with help from organizations, such as the UNHCR, Caritas, International Organization for Migration, or smaller country-specific organizations.

Anthropologist Liisa Malkki argues that these refugee organizations often de-historicize refugee situations. Malkki, citing French theorist Roland Barthes, states, “Refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general...[The dehistoricizing universalism] can strip from them the authority to give credible narrative evidence or testimony about their own condition in politically and institutionally consequential forums,” (1996: 378). She notes that there are significant variations in the lived experiences of refugees, especially between “town” and camp refugees (1996). Not only do refugee organizations de-historicize but they also de-politicize refugee situations, ignoring the implications of policies on refugees’ experiences (1996). Furthermore, “development” organizations highlight the material suffering of refugees by placing all refugees under one “victim” label (Gabiam 2012).

My interlocutors acknowledged similar experiences. Several of them said they stopped going to UNHCR for services because they “do not help.” Omar, an Iraqi husband and father of 3, admitted that he did not officially have refugee because he never completed his forms. “I do not have the blue only my wife and children do,” he said. “It is not useful. I can go and get it at anytime, but it’s simply not worth it. The blue card has done nothing for
my family.” While the UNHCR is obligated to provide some legal protection, this is often disregarded because of the lack of transparency and communication.

Omar’s wife, Marwa, said there are three reasons UNHCR would grant resettlement: if one member of family was working with an American ally company in Iraq, if a member of the family is ill, or if they have a family member with American citizenship. The American connection is interesting to note because nearly all of my interlocutors worked in positions that had a relationship with an American company. However, they cannot get resettled by this condition because most of these positions don’t meet the requirements of a “full-time American ally company.” This highlights the de-historicizing nature of UNHCR. A consideration of refugees’ past experiences in their jobs would reveal that they were (and still are) in grave danger because of their association with America. This condition is rarely fulfilled and poses an unlikely reality for most refugees. Even if an Iraqi did work with an American ally company, the probability of getting the necessary, formal paperwork indicating it is slim.

The next section places the Iraqi refugee situation in a historical context that, as Malkki suggests, gives refugees “credible narrative evidence or testimony about their condition in politically and institutionally consequential forums” (1996: 378).

“We are the masters and you shine our shoes”
-Noam Chomsky

In a 1990 address to Congress, President George H.W. Bush said, “Let me also make it clear that the US has no quarrel with the Iraqi people.” In 2003, his son, President George W. Bush, said, “We come to Iraq with respect for its citizens, for their great civilization and

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12 A blue card is the official UNHCR document stating that an individual is a refugee. This document ensures that the individual cannot be forced back to his/her original country because of risk of persecution.
for the religious faiths they practice.” 12 years apart, and the rhetoric of Bush-senior and Bush-junior sound remarkably similar. Both promise to “restore” and “revitalize” the Iraqi people. But the interviews I had with Iraqis in Egypt reveal that Iraq was never restored. Rather, the US invasions in Iraq introduced [more] violence, weakened infrastructure systems, and created many humanitarian and health issues. The interviews elucidated crucial facts that are supported by scholars who have dug deeper into the US’s intentions and influences in Iraq.

Noam Chomsky, an American academic scholar and a political critic, discusses the other motivations of the US invasions. Chomsky argues that understanding the history and intentions behind the US intervention in Iraq is essential to understanding the current situation. To understand the invasion in 2003, we must go back to the First Gulf War when Iraq invaded Kuwait. A US-led coalition emerged to remove Šaddām Hussein, President of Iraq from 1979-2003, from Kuwait, a former US ally. Faced with international threats, the outnumbered Iraqi military succumbed and withdrew. According to Chomsky, Iraq’s defeat achieved many purposes. He said that the weaker opponent “must not merely be defeated but pulverized if the central lesson of World Order is to be learned: we are the masters and you shine our shoes,” (in Simons 1996: 3). In an interview with the Peace Research Institute in 2003, Chomsky discusses other purposes for the invasion: Protecting US interests over oil, testing out a new generation of high-technology weapons, and ensuring an Arab superpower does not emerge in the Middle East.

Following Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait in 1991, many tensions within Iraq evolved. The author of Iraq: From Sumer to Post-Sadaam Geoff Simons describes the sanctions put on Iraq, including embargoes on food and medicine causing citizens’ faith in
Ṣaddām Hussein to quickly deteriorate (1996: 32). These UN sanctions were used as political tools to weaken the government, but also as tools to weaken the morale of the Iraqi people to make them more welcoming for the subsequent occupation in 2003.

There were many uprisings against Ṣaddām Hussein caused in the conditions following the failed invasion of Kuwait. In a 1991 article in *The Independent*, Simons quotes a US military source on America’s refusal to help Iraqis: “We’re sticking out of this. They’re doing real fine all by themselves right now,” (1996: 35). However, the US never left Iraq, and the growing violence and humanitarian crises reveal that Iraqis were not doing “fine all by themselves.”

Older divisions among religions and ethnicities grew stronger and protests emerged across the country. It was clear that Ṣaddām Hussein, a member of the Ba’ath party13, could not reassert his authority in the Kurdish north or Shi’a south (Simons 1996: 36). Ṣaddām Hussein’s violent retaliation caused 3 million Shi’a and Kurdish Iraqis to become internally displaced in Iraq or flee to neighboring countries. However, many Shi’a Muslims and Kurdish Iraqis sought revenge by threatening the stability of the Iraqi government. The uprisings continued and sectarian, ethnic and class violence became more prominent in Iraq for the next decade.

As I was understanding this situation, I realized that the history of the Iraqi situation is much more complex than imagined. Not only did it happen several years before the “official” invasion, but the US, my home, had much to do with the suffering and destruction. I grappled with this, and continued to learn how my country repeated history.

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13 The Ba’ath party in Iraq was founded in 1951 and came to majority Sunni-led power in 1968. Its main policy strategy was “to modernize capitalism as a route to prosperity,” (Simons 1996: 284) Ba’athism sought to remove foreign exploitation of national resources.
US strikes again: the 2nd US-led invasion

After 9/11, President George W. Bush announced he wanted to abolish “terrorism.” Iraq, he publicly alleged in his 2002 State of the Union address, had weapons of mass destruction, making them part of the “axis of evil” along with Iran and North Korea (Washington Post 2002). The way to remove terrorism was to destroy Ṣaddām Hussein, he argued. So the US invaded Iraq in 2003 in hopes of capturing President Ṣaddām Hussein. Below are excerpts from President Bush’s address on the start of the war in Iraq in March 2003 and the US’s plan to capture Ṣaddām Hussein:

"Saddam Hussein has placed Iraqi troops and equipment in civilian areas, attempting to use innocent men, women and children as shields for his own military. A final atrocity against his people.

I want Americans and all the world to know that coalition forces will make every effort to spare innocent civilians from harm.

We come to Iraq with respect for its citizens, for their great civilization and for the religious faiths they practice.

We have no ambition in Iraq except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people.

My fellow citizens, the dangers to our country and the world will be overcome. We will pass through this time of peril and carry on the work of peace. We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others and we will prevail."

The troops had already entered Iraq by the time this speech was given on March 19, 2003. Ṣaddām Hussein was captured in December 2003 and, soon after, a chain of events led to Iraq’s current divided state. The Sunni-led regime was toppled soon after Ṣaddām’s
capture, and the vengeful Shi’a party had gained enough support to preside over the government. The 2006 bombing of the Imam al-Askari Shrine, a Shi’a mosque, initiated the sectarian killings, mainly between Sunni and Shi’a groups. Heterogeneous communities became difficult to monitor and Baghdad experienced widespread sectarian violence.

Consider the following map of Iraq, which identifies the various ethnic and militant groups described by the Iraqis I interviewed.

The map above is of Iraq in 2014 (Al Jazeera English 2014). Northeast Iraq is comprised mostly by the Kurdish ethnic group, which is about 17% of the country’s population (Archcar and Chomsky 2007). Baghdad, Iraq’s capital, is home to most of Iraq’s Sunnis, which make up 20% of the population (Archcar and Chomsky 2007: 101). More than half of Iraq is comprised of Shi’a Muslims, and they live all over Iraq. The Mahdi Army, which is alleged to have killed many Sunni and Kurdish Iraqis, was often mentioned in my.

Like the Mahdi Army, Al-Qaeda is another militant organization that has brought violence, threats and fear to Iraq. However, Al-Qaeda differs from the Mahdi Army in many ways. The Mahdi Army is largely concentrated in Iraq only. Al-Qaeda has spread to many
Muslim countries and seeks to remove outside influence in Muslim countries. Chomsky said, “[B]in Laden and others see themselves as defending Muslim lands from attack,” (2007: 10). Their ultimate goal is to reinstate the “true” Islam back into the region.

The last army discussed in the interviews, which is not shown in the above map, is the US. President Obama announced in 2009 that the US would begin to pull out of Iraq. However, in November 2014, President Obama sent 1,500 additional troops to Iraq (CNN 2014). Moreover, the withdrawal of US troops left Iraqi citizens in even worse conditions. Archcar argues that terrorism is a threat “trying to impose something on a collectivity or a government,” (2007: 5). Chomsky adds that this is very close to the official U.S. definition, “though it’s not used in practice because this would make the United States a leading terrorist state,” (2007: 5).

For many of my interlocutors, the U.S is indeed a threat to the collective. Those suspected of helping American troops and companies are arrested or killed or receive threats until they leave Iraq. Those suspected of helping Ṣaddām Hussein and his Sunni-led government received similar repercussions. Because of the many political, religious, and ideological organizations in Iraq, many parties are competing for governmental power. This was heightened after the “withdrawal” of US troops from Iraq as many groups wanted to seize “control” of the country. For the 2010 Iraqi parliamentary elections, 278 political groups registered to participate in the elections, though many were banned because of association to the Ba’ath party (Global Security 2014).14

**Mission Accomplished?**

Over a decade after the start of the United States’ latest intervention in Iraq, many

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14 The Ba’ath party is a political founded in Syria advocating for a ‘unified’ Arab world into one Arab state.
Americans and Iraqis question President Bush’s speech. “We will bring freedom to others and we will prevail” is a loaded sentence that promises peace, safety and hope for the US and other countries that have experienced violence. But did President Bush actualize this vision? The Iraqi death toll has reached 500,000 since the start of the US invasion (Huffington Post 2013). If the invasion promised “freedom” and “peace,” why are more Iraqis dying every day and why are parts of Iraq still getting destroyed? Fallujah, a city 40 miles east of Baghdad, was almost completely destroyed by US attacks. Riverbend, a popular anonymous Iraqi female blogger, said in Baghdad Burning, “It’s difficult to believe that in this day and age, when people are blogging, emailing and communicating at the speed of light, a whole city is being destroyed and genocide is being committed - and the whole world is aware and silent. Darfur, Americans? Take a look at what you’ve done in Fallujah,” (Riverbend 2004).

Thousands of residents are internally-displaced refugees living in makeshift homes and tents at the margins of their city. In addition to the devastating living conditions, health disparities linger in Fallujah. Scientist Chris Busby reports that the use of novel weapons in Fallujah is the cause of increases in birth defects and cancer (Busby 2010). These health issues extend to cities all over Iraq. A study by the Red Cross reveals that “more that 40% of people are relying on poor quality and inadequate supplies and millions, especially children, are at serious risk of water-borne diseases,” (Alternet 2008). The report shows that conflict has a direct influence on access to water and other necessary resources.

Critics of both invasions claim that there are “official reasons” for invading Iraq but the real motives of the invasion are the ones that support the President’s agenda. Only

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15 This number is far higher than the 115,000 toll calculated by the British-based group Iraq Body Count because it covers all avoidable deaths. It also spans a larger period.
second to Saudi Arabia, Iraq was at the center of a region that had more than 60% of the world’s known reserves (The Guardian 2004). American military historian Victor Davis Hanson also acknowledges oil as a factor, but cited a “need to rebuild” Iraq for the sake of Iraqis and for America as an additional reason (National Review 2013). American journalist and the Washington Bureau Chief of the international Inter Press Service news agency cites that President Bush wanted to “finish the job” his father started in 1991 when US forced attempted to drive out the government in Baghdad (Lobe 2005).

How do we know what we know?

What most of us know about the Iraq War comes from news outlets, the Internet and what journalists have conjured. As a result of this faulty information, we shape our conversations to match popular discourse. But current analyses and commentaries, like the ones discussed above, prove that we should be more critical of the US narrative. The other sides of the US invasion can only be told by the Iraqis themselves and those willing to listen to their stories. Authors Das and Kleinman said, “In collecting the narratives of survivors by directly participating in the contexts in which the situation are made, [ethnographies] show the tremendous tensions between competing truths” (2001: 5).

I went to Egypt hoping to capture other sides, to give some Iraqis a chance to tell their own narrative. Zaid, who is discussed below, told us that he felt that we actually cared about what he was saying. Before we left his home, he said, “I am so happy to be able to tell my story to someone and actually have them listen to it. Interviews done by agencies are more formal and less like a conversation.” In addition to giving voice to Iraqi refugees and the challenges they face, my experience in Egypt also highlighted the incongruities in the US discourse. One assumes that the country they call home is a place with similar values,
beliefs and goals. However, my experience made me realize the double role the US plays. It is my home, but it is also the source of destruction for many.

US politics, law and media have depicted the invasions as means of “liberating” Iraqis and “rescuing” them from looming danger. But these stories tell us something else. These stories tell us that the invasions introduced more deaths, murders and violent events that will forever be engraved in Iraqis’ memories. The stories below are parts of interviews that add nuance to the more mainstream geopolitical narrative of the Iraq War/ I briefly lay out above and show how the US invasion did more to shatter their lives than to “liberate” them. In Part II, I discuss how these refugees attempt to survive this shattered world.

Jack and I collected these 12 life-story interviews in Cairo in February-March 2012. Although we have collected over 50 as a team from 2012-2014, here I focus on 12 interviews Jack and I collected in 2012. Because we worked closely with the 4 other members of the group, I also draw from the 24 other interviews and field notes our peers collected in 2012. Dr. Nadia El-Shaarawi, a postdoc at Duke who wrote her dissertation on Iraqi refugees in Egypt, helped set up the interviews. In the following year, I also interviewed Iraqi refugees who have moved to Jordan. An important distinction to make between Jordan and Egypt is the cost of living. It is much cheaper to live in Egypt, and many were allowed to live off of money made in Iraq (many were leasing their houses in Iraq). In addition to the cheaper cost of living, many Iraqis, like Akram (discussed below), believed Egypt was a beacon of safety, opportunities and community. Akram said, “[We] had heard from friends who had gone to Egypt that it was safe and the people were very nice.” However, the rising costs and the rising tensions around the Arab Spring have shattered this vision for many Iraqis.
These interviews suggests ways violence un-makes lives. The war and its violent aftermath broke up families and communities, it highlighted religious differences, and it produced physical [and spiritual] injuries that remain with the refugees to this day. The process of un-making a world is seen as a problem started in Iraq by Iraqis. However, these interviews challenge this narrative. The US, in many ways, has contributed to this “un-making” and it’s not until the Iraqis leave Iraq that many attempt to “re-make” their world (Das and Kleinman 2001).
Chapter Two: Violence and Suffering, Revisited

Yusuf: Forgetting it all

Jack and I met Yusuf at his apartment in Nasr City. Yusuf was the very first Iraqi I interviewed in Egypt. He graciously welcomed us into his home for lunch, which included an endless amount of traditional Iraqi dishes that completely covered our plates. We began the interview with the tastes of Iraqi biriyani and chicken lingering in our mouths. Yusuf’s wife, Maryam, was quick to clear the table for the interview. I remarked on the décor in the house, the ornately decorated walls, the gold-painted furniture, and the beautiful vases and glasses, and she took pride in telling us that she decorated the apartment herself. Yusuf enthusiastically agreed and asked if we should begin the interview. He closed his laptop and positioned himself so that his entire body was engaged in the conversation.

Yusuf, now 50 years old, was a top military commander in Iraq. He ended up working in the Ministry of Defense, which is why he is fluent in English. Yusuf also stressed that English is important to him because he dreams of moving to San Diego, so he has dedicated a lot of time to becoming a “private teacher” to his three daughters. America, he said, will make him be more open to others. “In America, no one is asking you what you are doing. It’s a free country. Here in Egypt, when you do something, everyone has his eyes on you so you are not free to do what you want.” He said that Egyptians were always watching him when he had his Internet café, the only job he had in Egypt. It was shut down because refugees are not allowed to work. Yusuf took this opportunity to show us his identification card, which is stamped with a “cannot work” label.
To understand more of his background prior to arriving in Egypt, Jack and I asked him about his life in Iraq. He made direct eye contact with me that created a visual hold that I did not sense to be confrontational rather wholesomely sincere. The first event Yusuf recalled was his son’s death. Yusuf’s tone was steady and evenly paced as he recounted the event that prompted his move to Egypt. Yusuf was driving with his 12-year-old son when suddenly he was surrounded by a group of cars. The men in the cars opened fire because they had come to the conclusion that Yusuf was working against the Iraqi government. “I was shot 6 times and I survived. But my son…he was shot once in his heart. And died instantly.” The room fell silent, though his wife and three daughters were all in the room. We paused for a few minutes and it was the first time I felt I saw Yusuf not as an army officer or stoic father, but rather as an individual brimming with raw emotions. He picked up a few moments later and said, “All that because I provided the American forces with information about the Iranian militias, and those militias tried to kill me. In that attack they thought I was killed so they left. But I was only severely injured—and the many surgeries in Syria saved me.” I attempted to delve deeper into his past and he looked up with a grin. “Ah yes…I try to forget it all. I try to take care of my daughters and family. I try to hope that the future is better than the past. I try to dream that I will go to the US and begin a new life for my daughters.”

A few days after that interview, I discovered that Yusuf would likely never get resettled. His position with the Ministry of Defense raises too many “red flags” with the American government. However, despite the extremely low probability of leaving Egypt, he continues to hope for resettlement. Yusuf’s relationship with the US during his position at the Ministry of Defense led militant groups to believe he was aiding the US. In many ways,
the US is to blame for the attack that led to his son's death and the disorder that unfolded in his life thereafter. Moreover, the US continues to be a reminder of what he yearns to achieve—a new life in a new country for his family. This notion of resettlement continues to give Yusuf hope, though I cannot help but wonder what will happen when Yusuf realizes that he will likely never actualize this dream.

**Akram: With No Address**

Akram, a 55-year-old husband, father, and accountant from Baghdad, is the second Iraqi we interviewed in Egypt. His wife was also an accountant in Iraq, and they lived a comfortable life working for the Iraqi Ministry of Industry. Throughout the entire interview, Akram was extremely steady in his responses. Unlike Yusuf, his body remained still and his voice rarely shifted. He began the interview by discussing the main events that occurred in his life in Iraq. In 2005, Akram was driving home when he saw a queue of American vehicles lined up ahead crossing a bridge. He stopped until they passed and continued driving again when he thought they all had left. However, he did not realize that there was still another vehicle so a soldier ended up firing directly at the car thinking that Akram was attacking them. The bullets shot from the rifle destroyed his windshield and his radiator. Akram said this event was simply “bad timing” because he did not know he had to stop for this vehicle. But this was not the event that motivated their move to Egypt. A few months later, Akram and his family discovered his brother dead with a gunshot wound to his head on a highway near their house. Akram's brother was a volunteer officer in the army. After asking him why his brother volunteered, Akram confidently replied. “It was an honor to serve in the army. During the 1980s, all young people wanted to serve.” Though his brother was no longer active when he died, Akram believes that the Iranian-backed
Mahdi Army was responsible for his death. Because of this incident and his connection to his brother, Akram decided it was no longer safe to remain in Baghdad.

Later in our conversation, I asked Akram if we could talk about his brother a little more, especially since I was curious about how Iranian groups could be so vengeful and influential in Iraq. However, Akram dropped his head low and got up with tears in his eyes, walking away. “Sorry, this was a horrible memory,” he repeatedly told us. Once he returned, he changed topics and discussed his hopes for the future. They cannot return to Iraq because the son’s name is Omar, which is a predominantly Sunni-identifying name. But he had no intention of returning back home. He wants to resettle to any English-speaking country. However, he was told that the US would be unlikely because he has to fulfill one of two requirements: “UNHCR told me that in order to be eligible for resettlement we should already work with US troops in Iraq or we have medical conditions that cannot be treated in Egypt.” As Akram and his family fulfill neither, they remain in Egypt until an opportunity arises. The complexity of who gets to be resettled and who doesn’t should not be overlooked. In Yusuf’s case, he will likely never come to America because he was working with the Iraqi government’s Ministry of Defense, although he supplied information to American troops. Akram, on the other hand, did not supply any information to American troops, yet it is unlikely that he, too, will get resettled.

Like Yusuf, this interview with Akram revealed that the shattering of his world is related to the US. His brother was an intelligence officer, and Akram believed this caused many people to think that he was plotting with the US against Iraq. The resurgence of this memory introduced a moment of personal suffering, but Akram was able to return and
complete the interview, highlighting hopes of resettlement. This suggests that there is a way of re-making a world after displacement to Egypt.

**Zaid: Heat**

Zaid is a 52-year old Iraqi. We met him in Cilantro café, and he reminded me of an Arab Vin Diesel. He was bald and cleanly shaven, wore a sleek black sweater, and had sunglasses on his head. Despite his stoic demeanor, he quickly told us that he wasn’t comfortable. “I don’t want to be so close to other customers, can we move to a more isolated place?” he whispered to Jack and me. So we found couches on the second floor of the café. Before the interview began, he clarified his motive for isolation. “You can’t trust anyone now. Many terrorists have entered Egypt,” he said. “They have been looking for Iraqis.” Zaid alluded to this imminent threat throughout the interview. When asked about his home in Iraq, he quickly drew a gun with a silencer attached to it. “This is why I came to Egypt,” he told us. In 2003, he worked for the Iraqi air force, which often worked on an American base. There, he said, Al Qaeda was stationed to secretly tape those who entered and left the base, ready to target any member of the Iraqi army believed to be a traitor to the country. Al Qaeda would often send bullets in plastic bags to him, sending him various notes urging him to leave or stop his involvement with the Americans. In addition to Al Qaeda, Iran and the Al-Mahdi Army of Iraq all sent him threats because of his involvement. “My job was in the Green Zone so that was a critical position those days. I watched fellow pilots get threatened by Iranian intelligence and Al-Qaeda...Wamiedh Lutfy, Taha Omar
Sameer, Ali Al-Zubaidi—these were all my friends. Go check Wiki Leaks. They’re on it and they’re all pilots.”

The event that prompted him to leave involved a close friend. Because of the increasing threats received in 2006, a few of his friends went to Egypt to secure apartments. Their families did not go with them. When one of his friends returned, he found his son grilled. Grilled. The shock on my face made Zaid react promptly. He assured us that the English definition of “grilled” is the same as the Arabic definition, using words like “BBQ” and “charcoal.” Without any hesitancy, he said that this act prompted him to take his family to Egypt as quickly as possible. Zaid told us that he wishes he knew what he did wrong. He yearns for a fair trial and hopes that these militant groups stop threatening the families. “If they want me, why are they targeting the kids?”

Zaid was the first interviewer to discuss the “direct access program.” If an Iraqi helped Americans in Iraq, their family will be considered for an expedited resettlement process. He does not have this privilege because he was paid by the Iraqi government, even though the Green Zone was under American control. Despite this, he did not blame the Americans for his displacement. “Let’s not forget my life was threatened in Iraq by Muslims,” he said. “The only woman I loved in my whole life was a Russian Christian woman I met in Russia during pilot school, and my uncles are married to Christian women in America. I don’t identify as Muslim now because this Islam is not the Islam I know....I am a person without a home, why don’t Muslims help me?”

Zaid’s world was disrupted because of his association with the Green Zone, which was previously affiliated with the Saddam government and currently known as an

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16 The Green Zone is the heavily militarized region that the Iraqi government occupied. It was used by the American forces in 2003 after the invasion.
American area. He received threats and his friends were murdered and this prompted him to try to restart his life in Egypt. Zaid was the only Iraqi who was adamant in thinking his displacement was because of Muslims. This causes him to distance himself from religion. In Part II, I discuss the role of “religion” as a way to cope. For Zaid, however, this is not the case. Zaid stressed that he does not dwell in the past. He said, “If I’m reading a story and I pass a chapter, why should I go back to that chapter and reread it? If I am stressed, I go for a walk outside until the thoughts go away.” Zaid has started to piece his world together by creating new relationships in his community, which will be discussed in Part II.

**Ammar: Struggle for Life**

Ammar graciously welcomed Jack and me into his apartment. We took off our shoes to sit on one of the 3 lofty couches. Ammar, who was 46 years old, is a tall, lanky man whose skin was rather mottled, in different shades of tan, pink and white. The youngest of his four children, Abdullah, ran over to welcome us. We began the interview with a map of his Iraq home. He began by drawing a rectangle-like house surrounding by two streets (a backwards L). There are two floors in this house. His mother and brother occupied the first and his family occupied the second floor. Straight in front of the house, he drew a machine that expelled bombs. He also drew the trajectory of the bombs and where they landed, which was the top of his house. A large part of his house was destroyed because of these bombs. “The bombs were not meant for our house but for anyone who police suspected of violence,” he stated. “The police set up a station nearby and our house happened to be in their way.” In addition to losing his house, several neighbors and family members, including his brother, were killed by bombs. Ammar told us that his brother worked in an Iraqi governmental position that caused him to have ties to the American military. As a
result, Al-Qaeda frequently targeted him, his family and his community. Because of these incidents, he wishes never to return to this house in Iraq.

Ammar eagerly described his role in the military without giving Jack or myself any time to ask any question. He was given a surveillance position where he measured out land that the “enemy” was expected to have. Ammar then took me by surprise when he started pointing to his skin. “Because of the fear I experienced being in the military, I developed this skin disease. It got worse as I became more fearful.”

Ammar stayed in Iraq until the bombs destroyed his house in 2005. He believes that his relationship to his brother and the location of his house in the crossfires caused his skin discoloration. Ammar said that it is only getting worse, and showed us a picture from just four months before, when it was not as severe. He said even if there was a cure, he would not be able to afford it. I asked if his skin coloration bothered him, and he said, “This affects me very much.” Ammar was the first Iraqi refugee I interviewed to describe a physical reminder of his past in Iraq. The same skin that protects him also reminds him of the tragic events that caused his world to fall apart.

**Omar: An Indian Movie**

Jack and I visited Omar in his home in Nasr City. Before we entered, he told us to take off our shoes. Much of the interview followed in similar fashion: direct and unwavering. Throughout the interview Omar answered each question with a sustained passion; it did not run over his words, but I could feel the underlying emphasis put behind them. Omar worked as an accountant in Baghdad, and he was employed by the Baghdad airport, which was run by Americans. He said it was taboo to be associated with Americans,
let alone be paid by them. He attributes all the dangerous events he endured to his connection with Americans.

Omar jumped right into the events that prompted his move to Egypt. In 2004, he was on his way to pick up his children from their school. On his way, he was caught in a battle between the American forces and the Iraqi army. He had no idea what had sparked the fight or even how long it would last; he simply tried his best to avoid the bullets that they were firing at him during those 7-10 minutes of continuous fire. “I was sure I was going to die,” he stated matter-of-factly. Jack asked him if this was the event that motivated his move and his wife, who had recently joined us, laughed. In 2005, Omar said he parked his car in the street and walked into his house. Omar did not know why he parked in the street, so after a few minutes in the house, he decided to go back outside to move the car in the garage. As he was about to go back out, his 3-year old son started crying telling him not to go. He stayed with his son to comfort him and, shortly after, he heard the sounds of gunfire. He immediately hid his son in the house and called his wife who was at the dentist to tell her to stay there. He did not know who was shooting, whom they were shooting at, or why they had come to his neighborhood, but from his understanding later on the people who were shooting were hitting anybody they saw in the street. When he checked his car after waiting for two hours after the gunfire had ceased, he discovered the window cracked and the radiator broken, bullet holes piercing through every area of the seat. Omar firmly believes that if it had not been for his son begging for him not go, he would have been dead or at least severely injured.

I thought this was the event that sparked their move, so I was prepared to transition to another question. However, Omar’ wife, Marwa, started to speak. One day after
returning home from driving, she saw a car with a man in it watching her, at first thinking nothing of it. After she entered the house she saw more and more vehicles begin to appear, with six or seven men heading towards her home. Marwa had called her trusted neighbors to make sure they knew what was going on, telling them to hide and to stay in their homes. The men who were approaching her home were wearing black clothes, carrying rifles, and masks covered up their faces and identities. Marwa described how she escaped the home through the back door after locking the door, climbing over a fence to go to a neighbor’s house, banging on their door, and begging to be let in. Because word had spread about what was happening at her home, no one let her in out of fear that she was an intruder and she was forced to hide in the garden for almost an hour. When she returned home she saw that the men had made their way through the garage by breaking down the door. They had ransacked the home, taking anything valuable and trashing furniture all around the rooms. Omar interjected that he believed that these men had only one mission and that was to kill.

Like many of the refugees I interviewed, Omar and Marwa blame America for all of the violence they have experienced and witnessed. They told us that they “will never forget” what happened in Iraq, but they have been trying to create new lives in Egypt.

**Faiza: On Hold**

Jack and I met Faiza in a Starbucks near her house. As soon as we entered, I spotted Faiza with her electronic vapor cigarette. I also notice Ghada, her daughter. Faiza is a single mother of three. Her two sons moved to America, and she now lives in Egypt with Ghada. In Iraq, Faiza was an officer for an NGO. The organization was funded by Americans but controlled by Iraqis to promote small projects for change within her community. She felt
that her association with the Americans is the reason her family received so many threats. When asked about what prompted her move to Egypt, Faiza told us about the bomb her son, Zaid, received in his locker. When it detonated his friend who had a locker next to him was instantly killed. Faiza said that pressure had been building up in Iraq, so the move became inevitable.

During her first year in Egypt, Faiza gained 75 pounds and smoked up to 2 packs of cigarettes a day. This liminal position was the hardest for Faiza. She did not have her sons and had no friends in Egypt. She has now lost the weight and quit smoking, but confidently told us that this is not her life. When asked what her life title would be, Faiza remarked “On Hold.”

Noor: Living with Faith

Noor walked into Cilantro café at exactly 11:00 am. This interview is the longest interview I had with anyone in Egypt. I introduced Noor above as a hopeful, single mother beginning a new life. Her optimism, however, cloaks her past, which is brimming with memories of murder, violence and threats. Noor wasted no time in telling me the events that sparked her move. There are two names that were targeted in Iraq: Omar and Hussein. Both of her boys have those names and they were both targeted because of Sunni-Shi’a clashes in her Baghdad community. One day, she woke up and found 12 decapitated male heads in front of her house with a note to leave her predominantly Shi’a neighborhood. In addition to this event, her son, Omar, was kidnapped, but brought back shortly after with a message to leave. The threats her children received made Noor determined to escape Iraq. However, by leaving, she would have to dodge the many Mahdi Army checkpoints. She devised a plan to fly out of Iraq by dressing up her sons in abayas, long black dresses, and
burqas. They made it to the airport safely and came to Egypt. The move, however, had significant consequences for her family. Omar, who had been a top student in Iraq, gained 150 pounds and failed 4 years of school. She developed “shock diabetes” because of the constant fear and stress she is under. Despite this, she is determined to leave Egypt.

Noor discussed the US only twice throughout the entire interview. The first time was when she said American troops took her nephews for questioning. The believed they were part of the “Resistance Army” (Mahdi Army), which was false. The other time was when she discussed her hopes for the future. She told me, “I am only 58 years old. This is not old in your country. I will make it, and I will give my children the lives they deserve.” She was never direct in mentioning America’s involvement in the violence she witnessed, and perhaps this is because she equated Jack and me to America. She made several references to our citizenship such as saying “your country” when describing her desire to resettle to America. This makes me wonder how much other refugees held back when discussing their feelings to America.

These interviews offer only a glimpse of the diversity of Iraqis displaced by violence. Some Iraqis, like Yusuf, Zaid, and Ammar, worked for the Iraqi military. Some had professional degrees and non-governmental jobs, like Omar, Akram, and Faiza. Many Iraqis, like Noor and Zaid, believed that the Mahdi Army was sending the threats and attacks. Others, like Akram, accused Iran of sending the attacks.

But these interviews also highlight a point of commonality among the Iraqi refugees I interviewed in Egypt. All of them have experienced an ‘un-making’ of their world. When describing the ethnographies in their book, Das and Kleinman stated, “In all these cases the societal spaces as well as individual bodies are marked by the signs of brutality: the
violence is *visible* in radiation disease, wounds, destroyed houses, and the disheveled, dispossessed bodies of women,” (8). For the Iraqi refugees I interviewed, they said their violence was visible in wounds, skin discoloration, and destroyed houses. Violence is also visible by what they left: family and community members who have been killed in the war.

The US has not assumed responsibility for any of the events that have happened in Iraq. Rather, US officials say, “We’re sticking out of this. They’re doing real fine all by themselves right now,” (Simmons 1996: 35). The idea of the US removing itself from the situation is supported by the “liberating” discourse we use, as in President Bush’s addresses to the United States. However, these interviews reveal that the US did not “liberate” or “rescue” anyone in Iraq. Contrarily, these interviews show that the US is largely responsible for the tragedies in Iraqis’ lives. Many people died in Iraq because militant organizations thought these people were helping US troops against Iraq. These interviews tell us that these individuals were not actually helping the US. For the few Iraqis working in an American company, the US provided a salary, but it was centered on business or labor. For most other Iraqis, however, the US was a temporary obstacle in their workspaces and community spaces. The fleeting interactions people had with US entities produced a lasting, damaging effect. In many cases, this reputation led to the deaths of many Iraqis.

The invisibility of social suffering puts demands on Iraqi refugees to forge memory. This begs many questions of healing, “moving on,” and regenerating meaning in life. Is it possible to remake a world when the implications of violence are often visible and memorialized? Das and Kleinman suggest, “At the level of the ordinary, the everyday social realities, states of rebuilding and accommodation are as complex as are the networks of
individual lives of victims...There usually is no clear-cut victory, no definitive crossing over to safety and renewal...Social life continues,” (2001: 24). The following chapters attempt to capture how this social life continues and how Iraqi refugees in Egypt continue with their lives. It discusses how un-making and re-making is a constant struggle. The unmaking of their worlds never stops, but their move to Egypt introduces them to moments of re-making.
This second intertext followed attacks by ISIS in the late 2014. As a Muslim, I struggled with questions of violence, sectarianism and identity. How do I explain to my peers that my religion does not allow this? How do I explain that there are violent groups in every religion, not just Islam? I turned to writing to attempt to talk to my community, to be heard.

**ISIS and its enemy: pluralistic dialogue and understanding**

*September 24, 2014*

*It’s happened again. The world has been plagued with another outbreak. No, not Ebola. Well, yeah, Ebola. But there’s another disease that has poisoned our discussions: ISIS.*

*A group commits fanaticism thousands of miles away and similar to many Arabs, Muslims, and other beings resembling ‘other’ in this country, I suddenly find myself in the position of defense. It doesn’t matter that I don’t know a single individual who identifies with this group. I’m expected to change my conversations to resemble the rhetoric of a feeble body. A weak body. A scared body. An apologetic body. This country teaches you to have thick sin.*

*But my body is not a canvas on which society can paint an imposed identity on. Muslim, Arab, and terrorism have become conflated. The three are not synonymous—not even close. Arab is an ethnic identity and culture, not a religion, and I fear and condemn terrorism just as much as you do, if not actually more.*

*Now that I’ve established these facts, please: Don’t turn to me for apologies for every terrorist attack. I don’t know these people, and I don’t identify with them in any way. And don’t turn to me for a lengthy explanation of what’s going on in the Middle East. I’m not studying political science.*

*Don’t get me wrong. I’d be glad to offer a personal perspective and informed opinion. I, like most Muslim Americans, am eager to engage in dialogue. That is one way to understand Islamic practice and interpretation, but it’s not the only way (and learning from sensationalized media is definitely NEVER a way). My concern is that there is a difference between honest inquiries into understanding and accusatory inquiries.*

*It’s on all of us to educate ourselves and those in our lives about what’s really going on with ISIS, and understanding its history is a good place to start.*
One notion to understand is that ISIS is not only un-Islamic, it’s anti-Islamic. ISIS, IS, ISIL, Da’esh, or whatever you want to call them is a terrorist group active in Iraq and Syria that declared itself as a caliphate of the region, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the self-proclaimed “caliph.” A caliphate is a dear term for Muslims because it describes a state that was motivated by Prophet Muhammad’s (peace be upon him) teachings and rule in Arabia.

Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) created the Constitution of Medina to govern the people of the land and he designed what many argue to be the world’s oldest constitution to echo the message of equality of humanity presented in the Quran: “Oh You who have attained to faith! Be ever steady fast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity; and never let hatred of anyone lead you into the sin of deviating from justice. Be just: this is closest to being God-conscious. And remain conscious of God: verily, God is aware of all that you do,” (5:8).

In his final sermon, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) highlighted that no one has superiority over others. He ensured all Jews, Christians and non-believers were afforded equal political and cultural rights. It is clear that ISIS is antithetical to the constitution that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) established and antithetical to core principles in the Quran. They threaten and kill anyone who does not follow Sunni Islam, including Shi’ite Muslims. There is not a single country or religious leader that supports ISIS, their goals or principles. Again, ISIS is not only un-Islamic. They are anti-Islam.

Second, other violent groups exist in the name of religion, even toppling ISIS. The Ku Klux Klan, which reached over 4 million members, attempted to “purify” America by killing African Americans. They publicly killed Blacks through lynchings and open fires. Their logo was the cross and their rituals always included bibles. Like ISIS, they used religion as a justification for their killings. Army of God, a Christian anti-abortion organization in the United States, is responsible for a number or terrorist attacks across the country, including killing abortion providers. Buddhist monks encourage the ethnic-cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma/Myanmar and 300,000 Tamils are persecuted in Sri Lanka. The Lord’s Resistance Army in South Sudan and Uganda is an extremist Christian army responsible for over 100,000 deaths. And let’s not forget the deaths in Palestine by supporters of Zionism. Thirst for power will lead groups of any people to do things otherwise unimaginable; history teaches this to us.

There’s no denying the violence by Islamic terrorist groups. But if we’re going to have this conversation, we should also discuss the deaths Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism and basically every other religion claims. But we don’t. Why? Because we know that these deaths are not representative of the peace, love and humility that these religions address.

Which brings me to my last point. Muslims, stop apologizing. The Muslim community is quick to condemn and apologize for attacks that have nothing to do with Islam. Islam isn’t only about being reactive. Muslims shouldn’t be either. Rather, Muslims need to be more proactive and vocal about Islam’s beauty, eloquence and teachings. The American Arab Institute released the latest poll numbers on Muslims in America. Favorable attitudes for Muslims and Arabs have declined to 27%. Too much attention is paid to attacks that bear no resemblance to us. Not enough people in America are well-informed on what Islam is actually about.
Muslims in America must remember that we’re Americans, too, and our identity is constructed by how we actively change the narrative. We have a responsibility to take hold over our own narrative.

And we all can start by stepping out of the passenger seat to change the direction of the narrative. Let’s all be active players in educating ourselves and educating others. Read. Share. Discuss. Muslims constitute about 2% of the American population, so we cannot do this alone. Start by boycotting or responding to Pamela Geller’s anti-Islamic ad campaign that will be placed in MTA’s 100 bus stations and two subway stations in Manhattan. Or fight back against Representative Steve King’s suggestion that the U.S. government should spy on mosques, Arabs and Muslims around the country.

I can’t answer all of your Middle East questions and I won’t apologize for every horrific act that claims an association, albeit false, with my beautiful experience with Islam. I will, however, continue shaping my life by the foundations my religion has given me: equality, truth, humility and peace. Pluralism is possible if we do our part to fairly contribute to it.
PART II: REMAKING A WORLD?
This part explores the lives of Iraqi refugees during displacement in Egypt.

Reflecting on the stories described in Part I, I hope to understand how my interlocutors found opportunities to heal and cope. Many people spoke of their faith as a way of coping, so I focus on that. As I explore below, I distinguish faith from religion, and explore how they work together in complex ways. I find that hope precipitates out of faith and the re-negotiating and re-interpretation of the future is central to this rebuilding.
Chapter Three: Exploring Religion, Faith, and Hope

I first turned to Merriam-Webster’s dictionary to parse out religion-faith-hope. The dictionary gave me three definitions for faith: 1) Strong belief or trust in someone or something; 2) Belief in the existence of God, strong religious feelings or beliefs; 3) A system of religious beliefs. Hope is defined as the “want of something to happen or to be true and think that it could happen or be true.” Religion is defined as “a belief in a god or gods, an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god or a group of gods, or an interest, a belief, or an activity that is very important to a person or group.” There are many points of commonalities for faith, hope, and religion. However, there are also differences that helped me understand how my interlocutors find sources of support and spaces to heal and cope. In these stories interviews my interlocutors said they derived hope from faith and used this hope to imagine a better future. The following sections examine how faith, hope, and religion operate in my interlocutors’ lives. They discuss moments that sometimes evoked religion or ummah and other times that they rejected Islam outright.

Exploring Religion

Because I asked my interlocutors about religion and faith, I was able to glean a sense on how the two often differed. Many of my male interlocutors immediately described the groups in Iraq that claim an association, albeit falsely, with Islam. They went on to invalidate the groups’ affiliations with Islam, making sure I understood that their Islam is the correct Islam.

17 http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary-religion
This immediate reaction suggests that religion is more than their beliefs and rituals. Islam is linked to the memories of the violence that occurred in the past, and although (in their eyes) it is falsely rooted, current stereotypes compel them to condemn it. Historically, there are many extremist groups that take the name of a religion to promote an ideology, although most people in the religion don’t associate with these groups. All of my interlocutors identified as Sunni Muslims, and many of them stated that their displacement was caused by the threats imposed by the Mahdi Army.

Though all of my interlocutors are from Baghdad, communities all over Iraq experienced similar violence to Baghdad. Sunni Iraqis account for about 32% of the population while 65% of the population is Shia Muslim. The remaining 3% composed minority religions. Though I did not interview an Iraqi who identified with a minority religion, Iraqis in Egypt, Jordan and in Durham indicated that they, too, experienced similar violence. The Yazidis, an ethnoreligious minority group in Iraq, was attacked in 2007 and in 2014 in an attempt to “purify” Iraq.\(^{18}\) Christian Iraqis have also been persecuted, and many have sought refuge in nearby countries.\(^{19}\) These minority groups experience backlash from both Sunni and Shia militant groups. The recent attacks on the Yazidis in 2014 were from the latest religious extremist group, ISIL.

Naom Chomsky states that groups behind these attacks arose from organizations that “see themselves as defending Muslim lands from attack,” (2007: 10). “Attack” is anything that may be seen as “foreign,” such as ideologies or communities. Many feared influence from these groups so, as a result, their religious expression was muted. They did

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\(^{19}\) [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/christianity-in-iraq-is-finished/2014/09/19/21feaa7c-3f2f-11e4-b0ea-8141703bbf6f_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/christianity-in-iraq-is-finished/2014/09/19/21feaa7c-3f2f-11e4-b0ea-8141703bbf6f_story.html)
not express their religions publicly because it could elicit dangerous attention from religious militant groups. It was not until the move to Egypt that many were able to publicly experience their religion again.

Islam was experienced in Egypt through prayers, in mosques, and within a religious community. These activities and behaviors highlight the “ummah” Muslims experience all over the world. As discusses earlier, Ummah is loosely defined as participation in a transnational religious community. When they were in Iraq, and now that they are in Egypt, the refugees are part of a Muslim ummah with Muslims in China, Pakistan and America. Ummah was derived from the Quran as it was used in several chapters. It highlights the importance of community, righteous leadership, and unity.

The idea of ummah as a community leads me to Durkheim’s ideas about religion and its relationship to social order. “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them,” (1912: 47). Durkheim argued that all religions were equal and true, so “church” can be replaced with any religious space, such as a mosque.

He also argued that every religion is, at the root, social, and all religions have three unique features. First is the belief in the sacred, second is a religious community (like sects), and third is a set of rituals and behaviors. Combined, these three parts of a religion contribute to a “collective consciousness.” Translating this collective knowledge supports the ummah and the beliefs and practices Muslims share. My interviews also suggest that it is not simply religion alone that contributes to the making of the ummah. There are other aspects that reinforce (or shatter) community that are independent of religion, such as the
mutual language, history, and geography. Many of the interviews in this section show how this *ummah*, or collective consciousness, contributes to the “re-making” of the refugees’ lives.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz argued that the sacred rituals and myths work together to impose a structure in which life makes sense (Segal 1990: 5). In describing Geertz’s early beliefs on religion, Professor of religion Robert Segal stated, “Religion, together with common sense, ideology, art, and other “cultural systems,” arises to cope with threatening experiences and thereby to make sense of life,” (1990: 4). Religion, to Geertz, tells a person how to re-act to threatening experiences, like war and death. This is poignant to the Iraqi refugees I interviewed as they tried to cope with the threatening events they witnessed by relying on elements of religion.

Anthropologist Raymond Firth studied the relationship between religion and politics and argued that they both have similar implications. Firth stated, “Anthropologists well know how religion may have a supportive role for some broad aspects of the overall political system,” (1981:585). Firth argued that a religion’s main dilemma is that it is rooted in imaginative and emotional responses to the human condition. Though it gets at life beyond this world, it cannot leave this world. Thus, religion is constantly changing as the politics are changing, particularly those that support control and order. Thus a study of religion would require a study of the various systems shaping an individual, such as political, economic, and law, shaping an individual’s life. Religion was a frequent topic of discussion but many even distanced themselves from any identity tying them to a religion.

While the scholarship of Durkheim, Geertz, and Firth informed my understanding of religion, it was anthropologist Talal Asad who enhanced my exploration of faith. Asad was
born in Saudi Arabia and grew up in Pakistan. Unlike other scholars of religion I have turned to, Asad is from a majority-Muslim context. His perspective was most useful when exploring faith in my interviews. Asad challenges scholars to think of Islam as a discursive tradition. He states, “An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with a reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present, (1986: 14). I was interested in this notion of connecting the past to the future through the present because many of my interlocutors not only spoke about Islam in the present, they often brought in their experiences with Islam in Iraq, which differed from their experiences in Egypt. Furthermore, the way people talked about Islam differed from person to person. I realized that it was not religion that differed, but rather the belief of what religion could provide, which is what I describe below through faith.

**Exploring Faith and Hope**

While religion is seen as physical space and rituals, faith is more nuanced. As I have spent months writing and re-writing this thesis, I still do not have a full understanding on faith. I cannot accurately pinpoint or describe it, but I have embraced this predicament. I have realized that faith is a phenomenon that I do not necessarily have to comprehend. It is subjective and personal, and though it was a common thread linking many of my interlocutors’ stories, it changed from individual to individual. For some, it was a “personal relationship with Allah.” For others, it was a feeling that must be experienced to understand. It became clear that a discussion of faith would need to incorporate more than just what occurs within the confines of religion.
Though faith means different things to different people, many interlocutors discussed how they derived hope comes from faith. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines hope as the “want of something to happen or to be true and think that it could happen or be true.” An example is their hope to move to the US, although it is extremely unlikely they will be resettled. This hope fuels their every-days and offers opportunities to imagine better futures and lives. The interviews in this chapter attempt to explore this hope and the ways faith contributes to producing it.

**Feeling faith or rehearsing religion?**

Before returning to the interviews, I want to discuss my immediate thoughts about religion in Egypt and how I came to think about it. When I was thinking about how the refugees I interviewed tried to piece their lives back together, religion seemed paramount. From my field notes and my own observation, it seemed that everyone depended on Islam in Egypt. Being there I felt Egypt was a site that nurtured religion because Islam seemed to be present everywhere. Mosques were on every corner, adhans reverberated in the streets five times every day, and religious symbols and sayings followed me in the stores, homes, and taxis. Coming from my Mississippi home where Islam is hidden, it seemed inevitable that one would experience a stronger dependence on Islam in Egypt, particularly in terms of prayers and Quran recitation. However, my interview notes reveal that this is not necessarily the case for everyone. Though many interlocutors pray longer, visit mosques more, and think about Islam more frequently, most stated that religion alone had very little to with the re-making of their lives in Egypt. Many of the individuals I interviewed did not participate in religious activities or behaviors of the majority Muslim population. These included praying at a mosque or abiding by a particular dress code.
This realization afforded me the opportunity to confront my own biases about religions in majority Muslim countries. Though I observe Islam, I believed that the Islam practiced in America, *my home*, is different from the Islam practice in Egypt, *my other home*. While in Egypt I had a sensorial experience with religion (*hearing* the *adhan*, *seeing* religious symbols and artifacts, *eating* foods associated with Islamic traditions), while in America it is very much a *feeling* I have, partly because Islam in America is often muted and in the private sphere. Because I have grown up in a predominantly Baptist town, I have learned how to keep religion within. I've allowed my religion to manifest in actions, but not in speech or appearance. If it is not discussing religious extremist groups, the media and popular discourse depicts Islam as unanimously devout through mass prayers in mosques; pilgrimage in Mecca; burqas and beards; prayer beads; Qurans. Many Americans, including myself, have internalized these images, and have constructed notions of what Islam is in these countries.

The interviews in this section challenged these notions by showing me that people approach religion in diverse ways. Everyone I interviewed perceived and practiced Islam differently. They contradict the widespread stereotypes of Islam and dissociate the features of Islam to allow us to see what aspects are most meaningful and helpful to refugees once they have been displaced to Egypt. Furthermore, these interviews discuss the difference between being Muslim as an identity and observing, feeling, and *doing* Islam. They highlight the complex relationship of religion and faith.

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20 A *burqa* is a long outer garment, typically black, covering the body of a woman, except the eyes. Many men grow out their beards because it is "sunnah." *Sunnah* means that the Prophet adopted this behavior, encouraging other Muslims to follow.
Despite the differences in religious practice, all of my interlocutors had the same end goal: They derived their hope for a better future from their faith. Their experiences with faith, either personal or external, produced an unwavering optimism that afforded them spaces to cope and heal. I also found that the personal or external distinction of faith parallels with gender. Many of my female interlocutors experienced a social faith while many males experienced a personal faith. I have divided the following interviews into male-centered and female-centered, highlighting the different ways my men and women discussed faith. Male interlocutors experience faith as a personal phenomenon while female interlocutors experience it within a social space. These interviews were shaped by the following interview query: Describe your religion, faith, morals or beliefs.

Maura and I visiting one of the many mosques in Cairo.
Chapter Four: Pulling in?

Akram: With No Address

The memory of life in Iraq, especially of his brother’s death, brought Akram to tears. He had to leave for a few minutes to be alone before continuing the conversation. When he returned, we shifted to his daily life, community, health and religion.

Akram said his life was “routine” because he does the same things everyday: runs errands, takes the children to school, and watches television. Frequently, he goes on walks to clear his head and exercise. Akram said he was not happy in Cairo because he cannot participate in the Egyptian community, especially through employment. He does not trust the Egyptian community, especially after the Egyptian Revolution. He said, “There is no safety in the streets.” I asked him if he plans on staying in Egypt. He said he does not. The US is out of reach because he did not work with an American ally company. He considered Turkey, but had not yet decided. But as described above in Chapter 1, resettlement from Egypt is rare. Even if Akram worked with an American ally company, the probability of getting the necessary, formal paperwork indicating so is slim.

When asked about his religion, faith and beliefs, Akram immediately said, “I’m Sunni Muslim.” Trying to inquire more about his faith, we asked him how his faith interfered in his daily life. He proudly stated, “Religion is a normal thing between a man and his God. I have religious rituals that I am doing at home like praying and fasting but I do not need to show the people that I am religious.” To Akram, religion encourages one to be an “ethical and moral person.” He does not seek extra support from the community or the mosque, but depends on personal activities to strengthen his faith. Akram also spoke of Islam’s role in conflicts. He reminisced on the moments in his youth when people with all faith
backgrounds were able to coexist. “We did not differentiate between religions when I was in school. I used to have Christian friends and Sunni and Shia Iraqis lived side by side.”  
However, he attributes “religious politicians” to Iraq’s destruction, and the Muslim Brotherhood, a religiously-based political group, will soon “destroy” Egypt.

Despite Islam’s relationship with political groups, Akram said he became more religious after coming to Egypt. He attributes this to “more time,” but he does not discuss exactly how he spends his extra time on his faith. When discussing his typical day, he did not mention prayers or the Quran but rather he discussed “walks around the community park” when he is free. Though his relationship with Islam is strengthened, he does not anchor it down to a ritual or anything that can be seen in public. Rather, Akram demonstrates that an observant Muslim can practice her/his faith and have a relationship with God in many ways. This counters typical portrayals of the media, where Muslims are usually depicted kneeling down in prayer or circling Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Akram’s interview highlights the difference between faith and religion. He does not indulge in the collective features of religion as described by Durkheim, such as the community prayers and gatherings. Rather, the strength to continue, stems from his personal beliefs and relationship he has with Allah.

**Zaid: Heat**

Zaid did not show much emotion after talking about the violent events that happened in Iraq. Right after he explained his son’s death, he smoothly entered into a conversation about his life in Egypt. He said he had more Egyptian friends than Iraqi friends in Egypt, especially since many of them helped him pay for his son’s funeral. Abdul said he did not see much difference between Egypt and Iraq. He emphasized, “Same
people.” He admits that he is always thinking about his life in Iraq, especially the times he would sit in cafes with friends, duck hunt, and went on picnics. In Egypt, however, he said all he can think about is his restaurant. Abdul is able to open a restaurant, Al-Baghdadi, in Egypt because he paid off the inspection worker. It’s a family restaurant so his family works with him, splitting up the shifts between himself, his wife and their children. He cooks with one of his sons while the others go back home. We asked for moments of the day when he is not at the restaurant, and Zaid paused to think. He said that is hard because the restaurant is open 7 days a week, so it is one of the main things on his mind. In the restaurant, he also employs one 16-year old Egyptian girl and one 19-year old Syrian girl to wash dishes and make the salads, neither one of which go to school. He explains he is happy with the family dynamic. When asked about the restaurant, he said “alhamdullilah,” meaning “thanks to God.”

This comment prompted me to ask how religion affected his life. Similar to Akram, Zaid discussed faith in terms of a personal relationship. He said, “Religion to me means that I am the best person I can be and that I am seen as one who has a good ethics. If religion doesn’t bring that to me, I will not involve myself with it.” He stressed that religion is something between Allah and himself, and that it should not get in the way of making relationships. We asked Abdul to discuss how religion affects his typical daily life. With a grin on his face, he paused and quietly said, “I do not go to mosques and I drink. Also, the only woman I have ever loved was a Russian Christian, but I have not seen her since 2003.” Surprised, but pleased, about his openness, I found myself smiling with Abdul as he continued to describe his past lover. His wife does not know about her, and he urged us to not tell anyone in his community to secure his privacy. Abdul spent the next 20 minutes
telling us about his other connections to individuals who identify as Christians, such as some family members in the US and his friends in Iraq.

This led to a discussion about perceptions about Islam. When asked about media’s influence on Islam's image, he said, “We are responsible for letting them think that way.”

Abdul was referring to the associations people make of Islam and terrorism. Abdul did not feel a connection with the Muslim community because they did not help him when he needed it. He said, “I feel abandoned by the Islamic community because I have to go to places like Caritas to receive financial aid. Where are the Islamic associations? If I’m Muslim, why do they not help me?” Abdul believed that giving a name for yourself, such as Muslim, is not important. Rather, “identities come from a matter of feelings.” Jack asked him if he used Islam as a source of comfort at all and he replied with the following:

“Are all the people who pray happy? Are they all healthy? Are they all rich? It depends on us. Allah gives us a brain and a mind to think. He will judge me and look at how I used it. One day a bearded man approached me about why I shave my head and why I was copying the westerners. I said to him, ‘Look, you are driving a car made by Christians, you are sitting in the air conditioning made by Christians, and the medications came from the Westerners. So if you want to be against them go and live in a tent in the desert.’”

Abdul’s discussion about faith had little to do with the community. In fact, he rejected associations with Islamic centers because they did not help when he needed it. To him, faith was about the type of individual you became rather than the relationship you have with the community. Moreover, faith was a feeling not an identity, which highlights the difference between faith and religion. When one adheres to a religion, an identity follows. However,
Abdul’s discussion on faith, redolent of Akram’s discussion, suggests that the source of strength does not come from external activities. His faith strengthened but not because of communal spaces or rituals. The notion of experiencing faith as a feeling suggests that it is a personal, private phenomenon that developed.

**Yusuf: Forgetting it All**

I did not know where to take the conversation after Yusuf told us his 6-year old son was shot and killed in Iraq. He showed me the scars of his own wounds, which was followed by a moment of silence as we stared at his forearms. We had reached a moment of raw emotions where Yusuf was staring at his scars as if he was reliving the moment he was with his son when they were shot. Finally, he broke the silence and said, “When someone loses his safety, he loses the desire to stay in that place.” He then shifted the conversation to Egypt, telling us that Egyptians are not hospitable so he is actively trying to resettle. He spends his days teaching his daughters English and trying to find ways to resettle. In fact, in the last week of my stay in Egypt, I found Yusuf protesting at the IOM office. After spotting me, he ran over to tell me he was protesting for transparency and responsiveness. He hopes he can move to America because he believes that it will be more open to others. He said, “Yes, in America, no one will ask you what you are doing, it’s a free country. Here, when you do something, everyone has his eyes on you so won’t be free to do what you want.” In Egypt, however, he felt there is no privacy or freedom.

Yusuf went on to discuss the flaws in the education and healthcare systems, highlighting the large inequalities between refugees and Egyptians. He said, “The problem is that ... Caritas is for all refugees, Sudanese, Somalis, and even Syrians.” As a result, he goes to private clinics, although he cannot afford it. When asked about mental health, Yusuf was
very hesitant to proceed. The group and I did not push this topic as it looked like he was very uncomfortable. This is also because he had recently mentioned the death of his 12-year-old son. Surprisingly, after a few seconds, he continued to answer the question. “Caritas does not help with mental health, and... I don’t ask them to.” He added, “I try to forget it all. I try to take care of my daughters, family. I try to hope that the future is better than the past. I try to dream that I will go to the US and begin a new life for my daughters.” Yusuf added that he is now 50 years old, so he wants to make sure he spends at least the next 10 years, which are his daughter’s youth years, in a good community and civilization.

Yusuf prefaced his discussion about religion by saying, “Religion is between the man and his God—it is not for propaganda.” He felt unease in Egypt because of the tensions between Christians and Muslims. In Iraq, he said, people are taught to be peaceful with each other. I’m surprised at this comment because it seemed that religion came up several times as the reason for the tensions in Iraq. Because of his reminiscent way of speaking, it seemed like he was referring to Iraq during his youth.

When asked about the transition to Egypt, he told us that his religion was not affected at all. “I prayed in Iraq, and I pray in Egypt.” Here, Yusuf describes religion as his ritual practices he participates in. Unlike Akram or Abdul, he did not discuss the “feelings” one gets after connecting with Islam. As we were wrapping up, Yusuf stopped us to make something clear. “Our religion, Islam, is the middle religion, and when you have confidence in your religion, you pray when you have to and always live with it.” Further, he said that religion was a “center” in his life and it did not differ with his beliefs.

Ali: Action Film
“Egypt is um el dunya [the mother of the world. I loved it when I first came, but now, I just do not feel safe,” Ali stated. He left Iraq to escape the growing violence, but his experience in Egypt was also met with violence. His son was assaulted and robbed and his daughter’s school was raided by men with guns. While Ali is describing the incidents, his wife Amana powerfully stated: “We are all depressed and not doing well.” Ali added that he is constantly worried about his children’s futures. He thought Egypt was "um al salama" (mother of safety) but he believes this is no longer true. In order to cope with all of the stress and worry, he started to smoke. Sometimes, he said, he can smoke more than a pack a day. If he feels that his emotions affect the family, he goes out for a walk to get in a better mood.

Wondering if religion is also a source of support, I asked Ali about how Islam affects his life. Ali proudly said, “I’m a practicing Sunni Muslim.” He had a unique gleam in his eyes as he described how “normal” Islam had been in his life since he was a child. He told us that his parents taught him about his religion when he was very young, and his beliefs and morals have continued with him until today. I asked Ali if his religion affected the way he interacted with people who identify with other groups. His grin slowly disappeared and he became slightly defensive while he said “I am not a fanatic. Everything was all right with associating with other religions and people before in Iraq.” He told Jack that the western media was portraying Islam in the wrong light. I tried to ask more questions about his relationship to his faith and religion but Ali built up walls. Before I even had the chance to ask a follow up question, he changed the focus to his son, Zaid, who had just entered the living room. Ali urged us to test out Zaid’s English skills.
After we introduced ourselves to Zaid and asked a few informal questions, we weaved in questions about faith. While laughing, Zaid brushed off the topic but assured us that he was not as religious as his father. I asked Ali to explain what that meant, and he told us that he went to every Friday prayer at the mosque and often gathered his family together to pray at home. His sons, however, did not pray. Zaid told us his move to Egypt did not affect his relationship to his religion. I followed this up with a question about his identities. He identified first as Arab, then Iraqi, and finally Muslim. Ali was the first Iraqi refugee I interviewed whose identity as a Muslim came last. “I belong to my country more than I belong to my religion,” he told us. He told us that he falls “onto religion when [he] feels [he] is in bad times.” However, he emphasized that all Arabs were part of one big community in which everyone was the same.

Similar to Benedict Anderson’s imagined community, Ali feels that he belongs more to the ethnic imagined community rather than the faith-based imagined community, though he emphasized his reliance on his faith when he “is in bad times.” His affinity transcends nation-state borders and enters a larger comradeship. Benedict Anderson stated, “Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible...for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings,” (1991 [1983]:7). Ali did not say he will willingly risk his life for his Arab community, but his preference for this identity over his country of birth or his faith suggests that it is an ethnic identity that he takes pride in publicly celebrating. His faith, on the other hand, does not need to be publicly displayed or practiced. Like Akram and Abdul, this contradicts the notion of Islam being purely outwardly expressed.
Omar: Indian Film

“Look at this card,” Omar showed us. “It says ‘cannot work’ in Arabic. As soon as Egyptians see it, I’m cast aside.” Omar feels that he is strongly discriminated against in Egypt. He does not have any Egyptian friends and, ever since his arrival, his family always feels unsafe. Omar said that he does not feel safe anywhere. He cannot return to Iraq because his connection to an American-funded Iraqi company will expose him to threats. Egypt, especially after the Revolution, has experienced an increase in violence in the streets. Omar told us his wife had recently been assaulted in the streets. The thief pushed her down and stole her purse. His son was also assaulted a couple of years ago because of his phone. I asked about how the Iraqi community in Egypt deals with this, and Omar haphazardly laughs: “My Iraqi identity means nothing. The Iraqi Embassy in Cairo is a joke. They don’t help anyone.” Omar’ wife entered the conversation: “Our Iraqi friends are now in America, but we cannot do the same. There are three reasons UNHCR would grant resettlement: if one member of family was working with an American ally company in Iraq, if a member of family is ill, or if we know a family member with American citizenship. We do not fit any of these characteristics.” Omar added that he does not even have a blue card, the official refugee identification card issued by UNHCR. He believes it is “useless” and will not help him resettle anywhere.

When asked about physical health, Omar admitted that he has problems, but he is only concerned on his children’s well-being. Abdullah has high uric acid, which is not common in kids. Usually, this is found in individuals who are 50 years old. Because of the high uric acid, his son urinates on himself unexpectedly. We asked what they have done to address this, and they told us they just came from Caritas yesterday. Marwa, his wife, tells
us that it was the most humiliating experience. In a loud voice, a Caritas employee said, "This is because you don’t take care of your son!" Marwa said she was completely shocked at the situation so she tried to find another doctor to treat her son, but she was not successful. They only gave him a test. Marwa showed me a prescription-like paper dated on March 1, 2013. It only had test results, which she already knew. She told me that this was the first time she experienced problems at Caritas, so she does not know what she will do. Their other son, Fahad, also has a problem with his jawbone. His upper jaw is bigger than his bottom jaw. They received a retainer for his face and jaw but it is not the right size. In order for it to stay in place, he has to physically hold it. They said Caritas will not help them with this problem. We asked Omar when was the last time he received a check up or visited a doctor. He laughed and quietly said "never." We followed up to this response by asking him how he treats himself. He says that he tries natural remedies, like teas, lemon, and honey. He believes that drugs are bad for the body, so he tries to stay away from them as much as possible. For his wife, however, he says he takes her to the doctor immediately.

When asked about mental health, Omar said "you will never forget." All he cares about is his children's future, so he tries to ignore any thoughts or problems that arise. He says that he gets depressed at times, but he tries not to show it. He has not been to any doctor. Instead, he goes on walks and reads the Quran to relieve the stress. He admits that he has had nightmares in the past, but does not like to talk about them.

I take this opportunity to ask more about his religion. Omar said his life belonged to Allah. He also said that he completes his “religious duty” and he goes to the mosque to pray. Working off of this we asked him if his beliefs stemmed from his religion or if he had formed them on his own, responding that they all came from his religion. Moving forward,
Omar stated that his religiousness changed in the transition from living in Iraq to living in Egypt. He feels he is more religious in Egypt than in Iraq because he has more time to practice it. With no job and a lot of time in his day, he has time to "practice how he believed he should have been practicing." However, it is not only his free time that has made him closer to his religion. He also told us that his age makes one more religious. He said, “Moving on in old age one appreciates their god much more and has the time to show true amount of religiousness, often reading the Quran.”

We asked if his religion influenced the way he interacted with different people, especially members of a different religion, gender, age group, or country. He confidently replied “no” and told us many of his friends in Iraq were Christian. He told us that religion is a free choice and people should not have problems with other religions, although he said that it is very much a problem in Egypt. Prying deeper we questioned him on how religion has influenced the way he has lived his life. He said he felt that his religion has helped him through some tough times when he was not sure he could “make it to the other side.” He cited the Quran and praying as two activities that have been sources of comfort. When asked about how he identifies himself, he said he is first Muslim, then Arab, then Iraqi. He said, "My Muslim identity is first because religion is first in life and nationality knows no borders. Iraq is the last thing on my mind because it no longer means anything to be Iraqi. Nobody stands together as Iraqis.”

**Muslim or observer of Islam?**

Before continuing on to female-centered interviews, I want to bring Akram, Zaid, Yusuf, Ali, and Omar into a conversation with each other. All five males came from different ages, education and work backgrounds, but they all experienced events in Iraq that
shattered their worlds. In an attempt to piece their lives back together, they all moved to Cairo, Egypt with their families and savings from Iraq. In Egypt, they all participated in different activities to make life bearable. Ali began to smoke, Omar began to walk, and Zaid immersed himself in his restaurant. To them, these activities helped them cope. As a student of global health, I was particularly interested in modes of healing. Physical activities like walking and smoking make sense to me as it helps individuals cope. However, I grappled with the idea of faith as being a source of therapy.

The men discussed moments when they relied on religion, often through their free time. They believed religion is a very personal relationship between oneself and God. Therefore, they do not utilize communal services, and they do not attend mosque frequently. Rather, they talk about their faith in terms of reading the Quran or listening to recitations. As Durkheim suggested, these are elements of what constitutes a religion. However, they do not seek out rituals in the social settings. It's not a social phenomenon but rather a personal one.

The complex relationship between faith and religion was elucidated when Jack and I asked about the importance of their Arab, Iraqi, and Muslim identities. Omar said his Muslim identity was the most important, while Yusuf, Akram and Ali put it as the least important identity. This highlights the distinction between the Muslim identity and the practice of Islam. For example, Ali told us he is a “practicing Sunni Muslim.” He reads the Quran and prays and he “falls onto [his] religion when [he] feels bad.” However, Ali identifies last as a Muslim. This term “identity” seems to bring in a lot of baggage that he does not want to be associated with. However, Omar, did not separate Islam, the faith, and Muslim, the identity. These interviews reveal that faith is experienced differently by
different people and identifying as “Muslim” and practicing Islam aren’t necessary the same thing.

Many roads were blocked off with burned cars like this one, indicating a protest occurred there.
Chapter Five: Collective healing

The following interviews tell the female\(^{21}\) experience of displacement in Egypt for the Iraqi refugees I interviewed. This chapter is divided into male and female interviews because there was notable difference in the ways males and females described ways of healing. While many females discuss the “relationship between oneself and Allah” like males, they also discuss the collective experience of their healing with others. Some seek out public spaces, like the mosque, to experience faith, and others seek family members and community members. Moreover, these women did not seem frustrated when describing their religion. The discussions were about their practices, beliefs, and how their faith made them feel. These differences are shaped by circumstances that surround refugees. These differences are embedded in a larger cultural context that includes and is reinforced by norms, politics, the economy, laws and history. This section aims to describe how these differences manifest in the expression of faith after displacement for the refugees I interviewed.

Noor: Living with Faith

Noor’s interview is perhaps the most memorable interview I had in Egypt. Her strength and determination moved me, and I am constantly reminded of her when I embark on any refugee-related research. As stated in Part I of this thesis, Noor lived through many events that confused her world because her husband worked for an American-sponsored company. Her husband married another woman, she woke up to decapitated heads and her family repeatedly received violent threats. The last incident left

\(^{21}\) I use “female” or “male” to signify perceived gender.
her with “shock diabetes,” a type of diabetes she said that occurs only after you’ve been severely shocked and scared. To escape the violence and stress placed on her family, Noor moved to Egypt with her children. She said she spends her days for her children, making sure they are fed and educated. When I asked what she did for herself, Noor spent the majority of the interview talking about the importance of her religion.

*When I came to Egypt, there was a mosque called Abrai Al Madina. It had an all women’s mosque close by so I prayed there all the time. There, my depression was crushed and I found inner peace. I prayed alongside doctors, professors and also women who could not read. This was where I could hide my feelings of sadness. This is where I could be happy. That is why I will always be Muslim first before being Iraqi.*

She described the mosque as the “place” to relinquish any sad or depressing thoughts and cling onto thoughts of hope and happiness. The mosque has given her hope she will leave Egypt, and until my last conversation with her, Noor was planning on resettling in America to start a new life. But the mosque also serves another purpose for Noor. The mosque is a place to learn and experience faith, something she was deprived of in Iraq.

There, Noor says that she was never allowed to publicly express her religion. “I lived a long period of my life in Iraq prohibited from mosques and from reading Islamic books in Iraq. My family did not publicly pray in Iraq because the government was afraid of Wahhabism…Osama bin Laden was a Wahhabi.” Wahhabism was founded in Saudi Arabia and many Wahabis believe it is necessary to enforce violent measures to remove anything “foreign” from the public sphere. When Noor got to Egypt, she went to Maadi, a wealthier city in Cairo with the Abrai Al Madina mosque, with an all-women’s section where she
continuously prayed. She stated that anybody who wanted to meditate and pray could come here. She felt inner peace when she entered the mosque. She was initially very depressed when she arrived in Egypt; however, her depression would disappear at the mosque. A group of women gave her books of *dua’a*, a set of prayers to recite through various situations. Noor said, “The mosque had educated women like doctors, psychologists, professors but it also had women who could not read.” In this mosque, Noor feels a connection with a community greater than her immediate one. The fact that this mosque “had educated women but also contained women who couldn’t read” shows how her faith encouraged communal gatherings and rituals.

Noor told us that she used the mosque to hide her feelings of sadness from her kids. She goes to the mosque by herself, but Reem, her daughter, voluntarily goes with her during holidays for prayer. She also recently started going to the mosque every Friday for the prayer services. Her son, Omar, used to pray and fast in Iraq but has suddenly stopped. In addition to this, he has also gained 150 pound and failed 4 years of college. She stated that Reem followed her religion because of her side of the family. Though I do not know much about Omar and Reem, the gendered differences in faith between them is evident. Omar’s relationship with his faith was weakening while Reem’s relationship was growing. Noor identified herself as Muslim then Arab then Iraqi. She identified with Iraqi last because “the war made people go everywhere and it scattered Iraq.” She said she was very thankful for where she was. When asked if her life were a book, what the title would be, she said “Living with Faith.”

Noor’s discussion of her faith is notably distinct from the interviews I had with men. Her faith developed out of the religious space she occupied and the religious activities she
engaged in. She spent a lot of time talking about Abrai Al Madina mosque, which is a public space opened to all women regardless of background. Noor uses this mosque as a way to heal and “crush depression.” The fact that Noor goes to every Friday prayer suggests that she wants to experience the ummah. According to the Quran, the Friday prayers, or salat al-jummah, are required for all male Muslims (Chapter 62: 9). Female Muslims, however, are not required to go to salat al-jummah. By going to salat al-jummah, Noor is extending the obligations of a female Muslim. She yearns to be a part of a larger community that she never had in Iraq.

Additionally, we see the gendered difference of faith within Noor’s family. Her daughter, Reem, started accompanying Noor to the mosque. Her son, however, “suddenly stopped” although he was more observant in Iraq. This difference suggests that the displacement to Egypt has a different impact on male and female Iraqi refugees.

**Ibtisaam: The Winds Blow Against the Captain’s Will**

Like others, this interview with Ibtisaam included her daughters, Janna, and Radwa, although Radwa did not participate in the interview much and had to leave for work. Ibtisaam and her family left Iraq because her husband, now deceased, worked for a company that managed office supplies for American troops. “It wasn’t our choice to come to Egypt, we just had to come here to escape the situation in Iraq,” Ibtisaam’s daughter, Janna told us. Ibtisaam added that they are “killing time” in Egypt, and that this is not where they want to spend the rest of their lives. Now that there is not a male head in the house, they feel helpless. “This is a must in every community,” they added. Janna and Radwa said that they always get harassed. They do not have a car, whereas in Iraq, they had a car and a driver. They were “spoiled,” as the daughters put it, because they did not have to do
anything. They never had to complete papers. Here in Egypt, however, they have to go to Tahrir Square themselves to fill out papers. Janna said that she feels “they will devour us,” talking about the men in Tahrir.

The daughters also add that they must now use public transportation, which is something they are not used to. Overall, Ibtisaam said that they are unsatisfied with life in Egypt. She describes life in Egypt as “killing time.” She says that she is staying in Egypt only to keep them safe. Janna says that she has no future here in Egypt after she finishes college in the summer. They applied for resettlement in 2007, but stopped the process after Ibtisaam’s husband started getting heart palpitations. After he died in 2011, they closed their file, and they abandoned the idea of resettling to another country. Ibtisaam adds that other Iraqi refugees rarely get resettled. They do not get resources that Syrians are given. Ibtisaam added that they are not treated as refugees. They are not given the same privileges as Egyptian citizens, and they are also not given the same services and aid as Syrian refugees.

When we asked how faith, religion, and morals played a role in their daily lives, Janna became very vocal as soon as we started the conversation, arguing “religion is the most important thing in our life.” She then stated that there are discordances between governmental law and Islamic law, saying that they often follow the Islamic law more closely. Janna then provided an example of this by presenting her hijab, saying, “It’s not a role that the government forces you to do, but in Islam it is mentioned by the Quran. It is a sign of our religion and a protection for the woman.” She explained that she is not simply wearing her hijab because her community asks for it or everyone else is doing it, but because her religion calls her to protect herself by doing this.
The family continued their conversation on religion even after the questions had been asked, clearly becoming an important issue they wanted to discuss. They listed different examples of rules in the Quran they incorporate in their life. Jack conveys that they are touching upon something very important and asked whether they feel their beliefs stem from their religion or from their inner-self. Ibtisaam states that they are raised on beliefs that were taught from the Quran. “It lives with us, and it is rule of the life. The Quran is our rules.” They finish by saying that they pray five times daily in order to receive strength and inner-peace. We followed this by asking how religious they would describe themselves. They all seemed to respond that they were averagely religious, not going too far on either side of the religious spectrum.

We asked if the family felt that they became more religious after they left, and at first they responded the same. The sisters argued for a little while and they revised their statement that they may have become slightly more religious because of the amount of free time they had on their hands. “Religion gives us strength through struggle.”

We moved on to ask them to rank their identities of being Muslim, Iraqi, and Arab, and all the women had different responses. Janna and Ibtisaam felt it was first Muslim, then Iraqi, and finally Arab. We asked the women if they ever used religion as a source of comfort, asking more specifically in the time when their father passed away. Janna responded, “Yes of course because we had the strength to continue and to move on because of our religion, and that makes us believe that something we had nothing to do with is just like our destiny.” Jack followed by clarifying if she meant that her path was destined for her to follow. She explained that not all events in life are destined, only certain aspects. Living life and dying are both aspects that Janna finds are destined by Allah, while all other events
that happen in our lives are made by our choices. She added that a wedding is something that Allah arranges for you and he is always choosing good things for you. We finished our conversation on religion when Ibtisaam said, “If something bad happens to the person, it is just that Allah is testing your faith.”

This interview also highlights important distinctions from interviews with male-centered Iraqi refugees. Most notably, Ibtisaam and Janna focus on the Quran a lot, and it is out of this that they derive a lot of meaning in their lives. They cited it as a reason for their hijab, a very visible feature of their faith, and the many “rules” that guide their life. The male-centered interviews rarely discussed the Quran or anything concrete as central to their faith, religion or morals. The women said that Islam is the most important thing in their life, and that their relationship with Islam strengthened after their move to Egypt. They pray five times a day to receive strength and inner-peace. They also said that their Muslim identity is their most important identity. Again, we see a difference between identifying as Muslim and observing Islam. With Janna and Ibtisaam, they follow the “rules” of the Quran and abide by to the rituals to fit the identity of a Muslim, and this gives them strength to cope and move forward.

**Faiza: On Hold**

Faiza’s daughter, Ghada, was the translator of the interview, though she also answered many of the questions we asked. When asked to draw her map of home, Um Omar asked us if she should draw or write. She pondered for a few seconds and decided to draw her family and kids. Um Omar said, “You told me to think of home, so the first thing I thought of is a house because of its stability.” Um Omar said she considers a house to be safe. She does not feel this safety in Egypt because she does not belong. Um Omar notes that
she had a house in Iraq. Now, she has an apartment in Egypt. When asked to describe her typical day, Faiza said, “house, house, house, TV, TV, TV.” When asked about community, Faiza said she doesn’t have Egyptian friends. In Iraq, your community is your family. The family is big and strong and always surrounds you. She said Egyptian families aren’t like this, probably because Cairo is big and everyone is always busy. She said Baghdad is much smaller than Cairo, and it is much easier to navigate from one place to another. Ghada said that she has Egyptian friends from college. They both don’t know anyone from their building, even their neighbors.

Moving on from their community, we transitioned the conversation into a discussion about their religion, asking them how significant they felt it was while in Iraq. Ghada explained that for both of them, religion is centered so that it is not to either extreme. Through their experience in Iraq they have found that there is a huge divide within their own religion, with Islamic fighting playing a huge motivating role in the formation of this opinion. In their Shia community they felt like people were trying to force them to wear the hijab, however they refused. Her mother felt things became more dangerous for her as a woman within the Islamic community. Before she had felt that she could visit her friend driving alone at 1 AM, yet once the war began she had to be back by 5 PM or she felt substantially unsafe.

Jack asked the two of them the motivation behind their refusal to wear the hijab. Ghada explained that neither her mother, nor her grandmother ever wore the hijab so they have never felt a need to. The extremists were making others wear it to satisfy their image to the community however she states that, “It is not important on the outside, you just need to be good in the inside. Faiza feels that maybe she will wear it at some point in her life, but
it will be on her own time and when she feels it is appropriate. When asked about her overall view of Islam, Faiza explained that it is about knowing who God is and spreading peace to all others. Ghada interjects by stating that those who take Islam to the extreme are misconceiving the fundamental points of Islam.

Ghada and her mother were in synch at this moment; however I could tell that Ghada felt the need to take control of this particular section of the interview. She explained that when she was younger she would often pray to feel safe, laughing as she told us she taught her mother how to pray with her. We asked how their relationship with Islam has changed since moving to Egypt, with Ghada responding, “In Egypt we understand our religion better than Iraq.” Stemming off of this, Jack asked if she felt that Egypt was more spiritual than Iraq and Ghada immediately responded that they did, especially since her only true memories in Iraq have been mostly negative. Though Ghada tended to answer many of the questions herself rather than interpreting for her mother, Faiza would add small bits of information and nod with approval from what Ghada was saying.

Ghada interjected by saying that many people under the cover of Islam are doing terrible things. Jack asked if she considered these people to be of a different religion from Islam and Ghada became very passionate. “They are not Muslim, they cannot call themselves Muslim.” She stressed the word cannot because she feels their actions are depicting the title of Islam in the wrong light. Moving forward, I asked their opinion on the conflict between religions in Egypt. Faiza spoke up by saying that she found it very surprising because in Iraq, her best friends were all Christian and she would often go to church with them.
I asked how they participated in their religion and Ghada explained that they prayed five times daily; however, they never visited mosques because they believe in a private relationship between themselves and their God. We asked them to rank their identities of Arab, Iraqi, and Muslim according to strongest association. They discussed it together and eventually stated that they both feel they are firstly Arab, next Muslim, and finally Iraqi. At first they had no explanation for these rankings, but later Ghada states that she came here in middle school and never felt good ties with Iraq. She has no good memories there and feels that her country has betrayed her from the experiences she has had to go through.

Ghada and Faiza agreed that they never plan on going back to Iraq. They would rather stay in Egypt because “home is where your friends and family are.” They also said that their faith strengthened, and this is in part because they were restricted from exploring faith freely in Iraq. Ghada and Faiza discussed many aspects of life redolent of the male-centered interviews I had. They believe faith is about the “relationship between oneself and God” and they also do not pray in mosques. However, they stressed the importance of family and community, which was absent from male-centered interviews. The collective consciousness that comes with a community gives an individual in the community the support and strength to continue, even if they are living in a new country.

**Jamilah: Les Miserables**

Jamilah ’s sister, Shedah, and mother, Rajat joined us for the interview. After the mapping exercise, we asked Jamilah about her typical day. She said that they do not have any money so they sit at home doing nothing. Jack asked Jamilah about family eating times. Jamilah enthusiastically responded that her entire family eats together every day. She only cooks Iraqi food and she gets her groceries from a nearby bazaar in Nasr City. Sometimes,
Um Mohammed, a local Iraqi community member who helps refugees attain food and financial assistance, gives them food to help offset rising costs. I asked when she ends the day and she responded "We go to bed early," which is at 11:00. Her mother agreed and said that there is nothing for them to do and they cannot afford to venture out so they just sleep.

They wake up early to send the children to school, but return to cooking and cleaning after they leave. I asked about weekends, and she and her grandmother disapprovingly added that they stay at home because of "no money." We were curious about the children’s typical day, so they brought them to the living room to meet us. They both greeted us by shaking hands. Jamilah said that they only go to school and come back. Mostafa used to go to Friday prayer (jummah) with his friend, but that friend was resettled to America. Now, Mostafa goes to Jummah every other week. Jamilah was very apathetic about her typical day, so I gave her a hypothetical situation where she had money. I asked her if her typical day would change. Interestingly, Jamilah replied "no" because Egypt would not be safe "without a man in the house." Jamilah was never married, and her sister got a divorce in Iraq, so they have been without any male other than Mostafa, Shedah’s son. They think that every family should have a man because of financial security--but they made sure to tell us that a man is not personally necessary. She says that this is not just Iraq or Egypt, but an important part in all Arab communities.

Without asking about health, Jamilah said that she was mentally tired. She started shaking her head in disapproval and looked down. Jamilah previously went to a "shrink" and now, even though she does not go, she is always thinking. She says that this is not just she, but all Iraqis are always tired. She is always thinking about the past and this saddens her, especially since she is always at home. Interestingly, Jack asked her about home and
her first Iraqi memory was about the good times with her friends and the days she did her hair. She did not mention the bad memories until Jack asked, which included the war and bombs. She said that the war affected her physically and emotionally in Iraq. For an entire month, she refused to eat and held the Quran the entire day. Now, Jamilah says that she is trying to only think of the future. She hopes that she and her family will be resettled to Canada, since America looks like a big desert to her.

Jamilah said that she does not believe she would be alive today if it were not for her Quran. Jamilah said she is very religious and that she prays, fasts, and reads the Quran every day. We asked her if she derived her morals from her religion; she thought about it for a second. Jamilah responded by saying that it depended. She prays when she is called to pray by the adhan and she cannot do anything “wrong,” and seemed slightly embarrassed when Ghada said she can do nothing sexual because she is not married. At this point Um Mohammed, the translator, is sitting in the armchair opposite me and said, “Forever a virgin,” prompting mixed reactions from everyone. Some family members, like Jamilah, laughed. However, her mother did not.

I asked about her faith in Egypt and she said that she uses it directly for hope. When her family reads the Quran, they have faith in their future and definite hope for resettlement. Later when we were talking about identity, we asked her to rank her Iraqi, Muslim, and Arab identities by importance in her life. She ranked her Muslim identity as first, with Iraqi coming second and Arab third. Jamilah believes her religion has been integral throughout her entire life, learning from her parents at a very young age. Although she states that they directly told her of their beliefs as a young girl, she believed that just
being able to see them would have given her enough information to correctly practice her religion.

Like Ibtisaam, Jamilah stressed the importance of the Quran in her life. A month before her move to Egypt, Jamilah held the Quran and fasted continuously for a month hoping that the “bad times would pass and the world would solve its differences.” Jamilah continues to use the Quran and prayers in Egypt as supportive measures. Unlike many of the male-centered interviews, Jamilah’s Muslim identity is the most important identity for her and she cites measures she takes to become closer to her faith, such as reading the Quran and praying. For Jamilah, religion and faith are inextricably linked. The religious activities, praying and reading the Quran, give her faith, or hope, that “the world would solve its differences.” It is this hope that keeps Jamilah dreaming of a better future outside of Egypt.

Yusra and Ahmed

The interview with Yusra and Ahmed was the last interview I had in Egypt and it included all 6 of the student-researchers. Yusra and Ahmed are married, and they were our community partners for Duke Immerse. They helped us get in touch with other Iraqi refugees in Egypt and introduced us to some of the organizations and programs involving refugees. During our last full day in Egypt, Yusra and Ahmed invited us over for lunch and agreed to tell us their story afterwards.

As we began the interview, Yusra joked with us, asking if we should use the American way of letting ladies go first or the Arab way of letting men go first in order to tell their story. We told them it was up to them, and after some playful banter Ahmed began to tell his story, leaving Yusra to get up and do a few more chores around the house. Ahmed
listed significant events in his life, starting with his high school and medical school graduations as well as his marriage to Yusra. When Yusra came back, they both took turns answering questions. The discussion shifted to religion, and Yusra began talking about her experiences in Iraq. She spoke of the multiple kidnappings, threats, and murders she had heard about, which she said led to her decision to wear the hijab for protective purposes.

Yusra paused, and looked at Ahmed before continuing. She spoke of an incident where her friend showed up to school one day wearing a hijab. Zahra was in shock because her friend did not believe in wearing it for religious reasons in the past. Due to safety reasons, she and her friends had hired a private driver that they could trust in order to get to school and back safely. The driver was stopped in the middle of the road and beaten by unknown men. They threatened to kill him unless the female passengers, Yusra and her friend, covered their heads. The driver had later begged everyone to wear the hijab for safety. Yusra began wearing it outside in order to avoid harassment, and removed it once she got inside her school. When she moved to Egypt, Zahra stopped wearing it altogether. “I do not think if you wear a hijab, but also a short skirt, you are a Muslim. If you cover up, but open down, what is that?”

Yusra also mentioned that Ahmed does not allow her to wear one. At first, I thought she meant, “prefer.” However, Ahmed clarified that he “refuses” it. He declared that nothing in Islam dictates that a woman must wear a hijab. Ahmed continued saying that this is a part of a political agenda that has entered the religious realm recently. He continued speaking about his distaste for the hijab and what it represents politically. He mentioned that Islamic extremists – people he does not consider to be Muslims, stressed it. The policy of wearing a hijab – the very idea of it – had not entered his country, Iraq, until
recently. He pointed to his mother who had recently walked in and mentioned how almost no one wore it in the 1960s-80s. After 1991, suddenly the hijab was everywhere. Perhaps it has to do with Iran’s influence, but he does not know.

This interview with Yusra and Ahmed elucidated many issues that were not evident previously. Most of my interviews were either solely male-centered or female-centered. This interview, however, incorporated “both” voices. However, it was clear at the end of the interview that the responses I received were much more complex. The fact that Ahmed “forbid” Yusra from wearing the hijab highlighted the influence he had on her responses. This was also highlighted in their dynamics in the interview. Yusra corroborated Ahmed’ responses on most questions and vice versa. Moreover, there were times that Ahmed would include Yusra’s opinion with his by saying “Yusra and I feel that....”. I was not able to glean a keen sense on what faith meant to them because, like many of the male-centered interviews I discuss above, a majority of the conversation was spent discussing what Islam was not.

When Yusra spoke about religion, she discussed what the Quran states and how she incorporates those beliefs in her life. For example, when speaking about the importance of Islam, Yusra said, “For us, we do not consider Sunni and Shi’a a factor in marriage. We only consider Islam. In the Quran, it says so....we have to marry believers, anyone from Abrahamic religions.” However, when discussing the marriages of their siblings and future children, Yusra said, “I prefer a Muslim, Iraqi man because I do not want to fight with my husband about how to raise the children. Because it is a long life.” Though Ahmed and Yusra both contributed to the discussion, it was evident that Yusra’s responses were
influenced by Ahmed. He had strong beliefs of what religion meant, and these strong views precipitated out of Yusra’s responses.

**Tying it together**

I looked for God.

I went to a temple and I didn’t find him there.

Then I went to a church and I didn't find him there.

Then I went to a mosque and I didn't find him there.

Then finally I looked in my heart and there he was.

—Rumi

The above interviews are redolent of what Rumi, the great mystical poet, said centuries ago. For Rumi, God was not found in the temple, church, mosque or any religious institution. God was found within oneself. What Rumi was describing is similar to the sentiments many of my interlocutors described. Many of my interlocutors talked about Allah, but even more so, they talked about the relationship with Allah and the belief in Allah. When describing this relationship, my interlocutors did not restrict it to physical spaces. Rather, they sought it out in a myriad of spaces, both personal and social.

I found that people were describing the complex relationship between religion and faith. Faith is derived from religion, and religion is an institution with specific beliefs and rituals. My interlocutors experience this faith differently, and though I cannot define what faith is, it allowed them to imagine a better future. As this act of imagining helps them cope with the events that happened in Iraq, I understand faith as therapy. It allows them to use their own imagination to construct a future that helps them cope. This notion of a better future encourages them to resume the “task of living (and not only surviving),” (Das and Kleinman 2001).
For my female interlocutors, they utilized elements of religion and community once they moved to Egypt for faith. This included mosques, prayers, the Quran, and the hijab. For others, especially my male interlocutors, faith seemed to be an introspective phenomenon. It was a feeling or a relationship between oneself and Allah. It did not include external spaces or activities. Moreover, male interlocutors spent a considerable amount of time describing what Islam was not. Repeatedly, I was told that their Islam is nothing like the religious extremist groups scourging the Middle East. In an attempt to debunk the misconceptions the media was portraying, male interlocutors made efforts to explain that they did not fit into the standard US definition of a Muslim. The act of detaching from the stereotyped Muslim identity and describing what Islam is not is a means of distancing themselves from the events that link them to the violence in Iraq. As a result, they constructed their own interpretations of Islam and used it as a platform of personal support and coping. This suggests that when many male interlocutors said they are “more religious,” they are not referring to religious elements found externally. They are explaining a personal phenomenon that was created by re-defining their faith so that it is not linked to violent events. This was strengthened through personal activities, such as long walks or solo prayers.

But why this gendered experience of faith? If faith ultimately serves as a way of healing and imaging a better future, why do different people derive it differently? Important to note is the context in which these refugees are embedded. As Noor and Faiza stated, an opportunity to explore religion in the public sphere was often minimized for my female interlocutors. Because of increasing violence, they often stayed at home for fear of arousing attention. In Egypt, however, they were able to explore Islam in the public sphere,
such as all female mosques and attending traditionally male-only prayers (jummah). My male interlocutors, however, had these opportunities in Iraq and do not consider these spaces and behaviors as “new.” All of my male interlocutors had careers associated with the US, and most of them were aware of the misconceptions the media portrayed of Islam. This is evidenced by the fact that, in the interview, they were ready to challenge stereotypes they believed we Americans had about Islam. Thus for the men, their move to Egypt was not just an opportunity to escape violence. It was also an opportunity to distance themselves from the misconceptions the media portrayed in order to construct their own interpretations of faith.

Despite the personal or private vehicles of faith, all my interlocutors reserved a hope for the future. They dream of better futures for their families, and seek out different activities to cling to this dream. It is this strength to imagine new lives that propels my interlocutors forward, although the daunting reality of ever resettling through UNHCR is less than 2% (Rosen 2012).
Your America, my America  
February 17, 2015

I have a question.  
But first, can you hear me? Am I heard? If so, can you be honest? I need you to be honest. Can you do that for me?

I have a question.  
But first, can you divorce yourself from the media? Can you create your own thoughts? I need you to think for yourself. Could you do that for me? Please?

I have a question. But I’m almost too scared to ask. But I need to ask. I’m going to ask.  
My question? What is your America?

No, I’m not asking about what you do in your America or the coordinates of your America. I’m asking you to describe to me how your America looks. I’m asking what your America believes in and who She believes belongs here. I’m asking because it has become pretty clear that your America has no room for my America.

My America, as advocated by my Muslim, Arab parents, has long served as a national beacon of diversity. It was built upon an interfaith foundation and it has afforded me opportunities to grow, learn and experience. My America is built upon a deeply rooted desire for justice (even if we fall short). My America values service and liberty and my America is what President Thomas Jefferson said over 200 years ago:

"If a Nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be. If we are to guard against ignorance and remain free, it is the responsibility of every American to be informed."

My parents believed in President Jefferson’s vision, and encouraged us to learn from our community and the history that made it. So, I became a member of my school’s predominantly Christian choir, my sister frequently attended the local church for discussion groups, my brother was a boy scout, and we all participated in Black History commemorations. And, with video recorder in hand, my parents never missed a single event. Even if they worried whether our conclusions about life would end up matching their own. They didn’t teach us to tolerate our community. They taught us to love our community. And more than anything, they encouraged us to never stop learning about it.

But I can’t say this has been reciprocated. Aside from years of backlash for mom’s hijab or dad’s accent or the letters and snide and deceptive remarks that urged us to not move in to our newly built home, my family continues to experience a different America—a less of what America could be for them. And this is not just my family. This is virtually every group that does not fit the paradigm this country holds on a pedestal.
And I don’t have to look too far back to see the implications of this manmade American idol in this falsely woven narrative.

The most recent consequence of this rigid narrative is the Chapel Hill shootings of Deah Barakat, his wife, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, and her sister Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha. These three young and talented individuals were sources of love and service in their schools, communities and families, and truly sought to make both their local and distant communities a better place. A video by the suspect’s wife, who has now filed for divorce, and the suspect’s lawyer attempted to piece my America back together by offering answers to the incident.

It is remarkably easy to believe the dominant and prominent narrative. When watching the video, I found myself contemplating the rationale of the murderer. But I was quickly shaken awake to its ludicrousness. It’s clear how one can manipulate a situation to align with a particular agenda. The lawyer argues that the 3 victims were at the “wrong place at the wrong time,” although they were inside THEIR home. Secondly, the lawyer says, “It is a simple matter [that] has nothing to do with the religious faith of the victims. It has nothing to do with terrorism.” But there is nothing simple about taking not 1, not 2, BUT 3 lives. And by North Carolina’s definition, terrorism is an act of violence or force against a person. I’d say execution style killings count as acts of violence. Lastly, the lawyer said, “In my personal opinion….This highlights the importance of access to mental health care and removing the stigma in our society so people can ask for the help they need.” Yet again, we are told a white man can’t be a terrorist if he’s mentally ill. Also, what historical, psychological, or medical background allows him to assert his opinion? I cringed as his words fed millions of peoples’ shallowly reasoned and (mis)informed opinions.

And we can’t say this is only ignorant America. This is seen in our universities, too. Earlier this semester, I received a call from my sister telling me that a group of Muslim families in Mississippi were writing a response to Professor Carol M. Swain, a professor of political science and law at Vanderbilt University. Professor Swain published a column arguing that the Charlie Hebdo attacks prove that Islam “poses an absolute danger to us and our children unless it is monitored.” For Americans to be “safe,” Swain suggests some guidelines for Muslims: “Civic education and other indicators of assimilation should be prerequisite for remaining and advancing in this nation.” When an individual holds so much power, it is essential s/he use it in the most productive way. What Swain did, however, is encourage the marginalization and dehumanization of Muslims. She painted an image of what America looks like, and it is clear that Muslims did not make it into this picture. My younger brother is downright American. He’s a sports fanatic, hip-hop loving freshman at Vanderbilt, and I can’t help but wonder how many people Swain already influenced in developing subtle or unconscious bias or even worse, outright hatred against him simply for the culture/faith he identifies with. The Chapel Hill shootings and the Vanderbilt professor’s article are just two events of a much longer story. In the past week alone, there have been several threats and attacks on brown, black, and other-ed bodies, but rather than discussing each event, I want to shed light on the culture in which they’re precipitating out of. These prejudices are rooted in knowledge that individuals, both those with PhDs and those without— perpetuate. I’m all for free speech, but people should be held accountable if their speech inflicts harm to a
community. We cannot sit idle as people deliberately spread false stereotypes that contribute to the damage and dehumanization of a community.

To dispel ignorance out of our country, I urge you to live out Thomas Jefferson’s quote:

“If we are to guard against ignorance and remain free, it is the responsibility of every American to be informed.”

It is not only up to Muslims to tackle Islamophobia, or Black Americans to fight racism or LBGTQ activists to fight for equal rights. It’s up to all of us to fight ignorance with education.

So, I ask again.
What is your America?

But first, am I seen yet? Are you hearing me? Am I still just a #hashtag or do I actually matter now? Are you being honest? Can you create your own thoughts? I need you to think for yourself. Could you do that for me? Please?

Forget about what journalism says or what your professor says or even what your family says. Can you search within and locate those prejudices? Can you confront them before they confront us, before they precipitate in a human interaction? I need you to be honest. I need you to ask yourself what is your America and if I will honestly ever have a place in it.

Leena El-Sadek is a Trinity senior. Her column runs every other Wednesday.
PART III: THE NEXT MOVE
"You know, I'm only 58 years old.

That's not old in your country.

I will make it, and I will give my children the lives they deserve.

What's the title of my life? Let's call it Living with Faith for now."—Noor

Noor’s confidence for a better future is reminiscent of many of the interviews I had with Iraqi refugees in Egypt. Their unwavering faith helps them imagine a better future, and they cling to this faith to move them forward. But what is faith? Where is it derived from? And how is it constructed for different people? These are the questions that emerged out of my interactions with Iraqi refugees in Egypt and guided the trajectory of my thesis.

My interactions with refugees in Egypt, Jordan and North Carolina suggest that faith is a factor that propels Iraqi refugees “forward.” When their lives are shattered and their worlds stop making sense, they cling to faith as a way to heal in order to imagine a better future. This act of imaging allows them to live and not just survive, to search and not just sit, to dream and not just accept reality. Although the outcome for faith was similar for both my male and female interlocutors, it was derived differently. For many female interlocutors, they discussed faith in terms of outwardly religious expression. Many discussed the Quran, mosque, hijab, and collective prayers as a way of deriving a faith reinforced by social gatherings, rituals and behaviors. My male interlocutors, however, described their faith as a “feeling” or a relationship between themselves and Allah. They distanced themselves from groups in Iraq that falsely claim an association with Islam and constructed their own interpretations of Islam. This is supported by the personal activities they described, such as personal prayers and long walks. The different practices of faith
suggest that refugees’ previous experience to religion and American companies affects the way they pursue faith in Egypt.

To conclude, I turned to the refugees I have met in Durham, North Carolina over the last 3 years, especially female Iraqi refugees. As mentioned in the introduction, I started SuWA: Supporting Women’s Action in 2013 after I completed Duke Immerse. I have formed close relationships with refugees from Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, and Afghanistan in the area and have been introduced to some of the most pressing issues shaping their lives. All of them are part of the 2% who were afforded an opportunity to resettle in another country in order to begin re-making their lives. But as I look at my experiences with Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Egypt, and the US, I’m not sure that this hope for a better future will ever be actualized.

Refugees in Durham are met with challenges that are similar to those in Egypt and Jordan. Employment and financial instability are central to these challenges. Although many occupied professional or sustainable jobs in their home countries, they work minimum wage jobs in their “new” communities to support their families. Usually one member of the family is encouraged to work, often the male, to ensure that their annual salary does not exceed the cutoff for welfare programs. Language barriers are also significant, especially for the women who continuously stay at home. This prevents them from piecing together a new life full of new relationships and interactions with members of the community.

In addition to the language, financial, and cultural barriers, refugees are confronted with an additional challenge that hinders their ability to re-make their worlds in the US. Most recently in early 2015, the Duke adhan reversal was followed by the Chapel Hill
shootings and the murder of a recent Iraqi immigrant, three events that made news in Egypt and Iraq.\textsuperscript{22} The shootings of Deah Barakat, Yusor Abu Salha, and Razan Abu Salha 8 miles down the road prompted me to question if my America would ever have room for Arab, Muslim identities, including my own. A few days after the shootings, I noticed that many of the refugees that attend my weekly class were posting articles, stories, and prayers on Facebook. Their fear was apparent online, and after talking to Professor Shanahan, my three-year mentor, professor and supporter, I decided to visit the families in their homes.

During the visits, many of the families vocalized worries that this America was not what they thought it was. They left Iraq because of the increasing violence, only to come to a country that answered discrimination with violence. The following week after the shootings, SuWA held a vigil and open discussion circle where the women could discuss their feelings. Again, the women talked about the lack of safety and security. They started talking about life in Iraq, Egypt, Jordan and Sudan and how, at least there, there was a collective suffering that made them feel that they were a part of something bigger. The women decided to read a Quranic verse together, and many of them made statements that this will not strip them of their faith. “Allah has a plan,” many of them, teary-eyed, reminded me.

After the vigil, I was confronted with a dilemma that made me revisit my thesis. The refugees I interviewed in Egypt and in Jordan left Iraq because their worlds were shattered. They lost family members and friends, houses and careers, fortunes and meaning. They escaped to Jordan and Egypt in an attempt to rebuild their lives with the support of their unwavering faith. They all have hopes of resettling to the US or another resettling country.

\textsuperscript{22} The Iraqi immigrant was in America for merely 20 days before killed. He was playing in the snow in front of his apartment in Texas.
where they can regain control of their lives and carve out their own identities. The select few who have resettled to the US have been met with parallel challenges, such as Islamophobia and marginalization. They continue to feel unsafe and attempt to find ways to stay out of the public sphere. As a result, many of the families I have developed relationships with are moving to states across the country. For refugees who remain, they participate in activities that parallel those in Egypt.

For example, during a SuWA night, we gather at the Center for Muslim Life. The night ended up in biriyani-making and belly-dancing, quintessential activities for large gatherings. For that night, we came together as a community, with food and music, and not as refugees and students. This meant a lot to me as I was able to step out of my role as an American student. But looking at my experiences in Egypt, this means a lot to them, as well. The women at SuWA value community, and this is evidenced by the returns every week and at every social gathering.

Despite all of the challenges they have confronted in America, the refugees I have met in Durham are determined that the future will be better. They too, like the refugees I interviewed in Egypt, believe their world will one day make sense. I’m not sure if the refugees I have met will ever be able to escape the challenges in their lives, but they cling onto their faith to keep imagining better futures. They keep
working, and as evidenced by my latest encounters with the Durham refugee community, they keep migrating, hoping that they will, one day, discover a safe, comfortable life that makes sense to them.
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