

DUKE UNIVERSITY  
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Confronting the Imperial Narrative: Counter-Narratives from  
Iraqi and Syrian Refugees in Jordan

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April 2018

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for Graduation with Distinction

Program in International Comparative Studies  
Trinity College of Arts and Sciences

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would first like to thank all forty of my interviewees in Jordan for opening your homes to me and for taking out the time to share a part of yourselves with me. Words cannot express my gratitude.

Thank you to my wonderful advisor, Professor Suzanne Shanahan. Your support--not only during the course of this thesis, but also throughout my undergraduate years--has meant so much.

Thank you Professor Jessica Namakkal, for all of your valuable advice and for constantly pushing me to think of the bigger picture.

To Ammar Shaaban, having the opportunity to run around the streets of Hashemi Shamali with you was the greatest privilege. Thank you for the guidance, the connects, and the best summer in Amman.

And finally to my lovely family, thank you for your steadfast encouragement in everything and for being the greatest source of inspiration in my life.

This thesis would not have been possible without the generous support from the Kenan Institute of Ethics at Duke University.

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores how individual refugees respond to imposed narratives about their communities. Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan (n=40) were interviewed during the summer of 2018. Each interviewee's response was recorded and coded to gain insight into attitudes towards Western institutions responsible for resettlement cases. Given that normative social roles can be constructed in institutional narratives that serve to sustain power inequalities, the interviews reveal how these roles that define the "refugee" are constructed, naturalized, and challenged in displaced communities. The counter narratives from those who were interviewed directly point to the way institutional narratives shape neo-liberal forms of control centered on human rights rhetoric and explain how states use the commodification of suffering through the normative refugee asylum story to distance and other the marginalized. Finally, this thesis finds that refugees' resentment towards imperial control, which comes out of counter-narratives, is centered around an unease with Western power and the rise of the military-industrial complex.

## Introduction

My arrival to Amman in the summer of 2017 coincided with the tail end of the holy month of Ramadan. Everyone had readjusted their lifestyle to fit the usual dawn to dusk fast and life was moving at a slower pace (at least during the day) than usual. During the last few days of Ramadan, I spent my nights out with close Jordanian friends and their families often enjoying long conversations over *shisha* in the artsy and charming district of Weibdeh. On one of those last nights I was welcomed to join Hassan and his family for *iftaar* (the meal at sunset to break one's fast). Hassan had moved to Jordan with his wife and children to escape the violence in his home city of Palmyra, Syria. I had met Hassan two summers ago while conducting research through Duke University, and when he found out I was in Amman again that summer, he was quick to open his home to me in accordance with the generous spirit of hospitality that I have grown to love so much about Jordan. After we had all been stuffed with Syrian food, we sat on cushions on the floor to talk, drink tea, and clap as we watched Hassan's three little girls dance around the room to Daddy Yankee and Saad Lamjarred.

We got to talking and Hassan asked me what country my passport was from. When I told him I had a U.S. passport he told me how lucky it was that I had this document. He told me that this meant I was a citizen everywhere I went. My American passport allowed me to travel the world and cross borders without a second thought. I was especially moved when Hassan told me "you never feel like you don't belong." Hassan was pointing out how my American passport comes with incredible privilege. My Jordanian host mom jokingly once said to me that it would be easy for me to get a husband here because everyone wants American citizenship. I laughed at her joke then, but now I realize that something as arbitrary as the name of a country on your passport can decide not only where you can go on vacation, but also where you can work, attend

college, and seek refuge. It can give you all the opportunity in the world or limit your ability to imagine your own future. Reflecting on Hassan's words, I began to question why I have been given such an incredible privilege in the first place. When I was unable to come up with an answer I came to the conclusion that there was absolutely no reason that I was in this position and another was forced to stick within the borders of a land that had been destroyed by outside powers or stuck in a country of asylum that could not support them. In this world of arbitrary borders and increased nationalism, freedom of movement is unattainable for the less privileged. Powerful states can essentially assign your level of freedom depending on the color and symbol on your passport. This realization of my own privilege solely based on my American identity has been extremely humbling because so much of the opportunity afforded to me has stemmed from the sole fact that I was born in the United States. What is worse is that America's designation as the land of opportunity, filled with resources, liberty, and democracy, very much relies on the exploitation of people in other countries (not to mention within America itself) and the extraction of resources from other lands. These reflections of my own identity throughout college have been instrumental in shaping my discomfort with complex state powers that I have largely benefitted from.

Freshman year I decided to enroll in the first year Focus program at my university centered around Ethics, Leadership, and Global Citizenship because I was an enthusiastic first-year passionate about social justice and those three topics caught my eye. As part of the program I chose to register in a class titled Refugees, Rights, and Resettlement. Throughout my childhood in Phoenix I was used to visiting refugee families from Sudan, Somalia, and Iraq who attended our local mosque. My mom, sister, and I would often spend our Saturday afternoons visiting their homes and teaching the youngest ones how to pronounce the letters of the alphabet. As both

a child of immigrants and an Indian Muslim, I could half fit in with many of the families I worked with as I practiced my broken Arabic and spent my Eid holidays with the community. I am not sure what struck me about these communities, but when I began working in Durham with Iraqi refugee families, I very quickly and naturally befriended many and felt as though some of the elder women were like my aunts, inviting me to their homes to break bread, drink *shai*, and talk Bollywood all while intermittently throwing in *inshallahs* or *alhumdullilahs* into our conversations.

Once, during our service learning class when I was joking around with some of the older refugee kids, one of the Duke student tutors mistook me for a refugee as well. I felt weird being associated with the word “refugee”. Why did that make me uncomfortable? In fact, admitting that I ever felt uncomfortable is what makes me ashamed today. I began thinking about what my discomfort meant. During the 2016 presidential election there seemed to be a distinct obsession with refugees and everyone seemed to have an opinion on what to do about the “refugee problem.” I began to realize how othering this was especially when many well-intentioned people seemed to focus on charity rather than solidarity. The refugee community was a group that many simply depicted as needing our help and being associated with that narrative made me uncomfortable. I thought I was a strong, independent student who had a dream and a future...but then again, so were they. I began to understand how unnatural it was to speak about masses of people who were at the end of the day, just people, as either terrorists or helpless victims simply to further a political agenda. These oversimplifications were not only inaccurate, but also largely dehumanizing. While spending a semester in Jordan forming close friendships with refugees and while continuing with my own research and service with refugee communities in the U.S., my discomfort with the entire dialogue surrounding the “refugee problem” heightened.

It was freshman year during my International Comparative Studies class that I first learned about the artificial construction of borders. Before coming to college I had never questioned the way systems like nation-states and borders were created and had somehow internalized that this was how the world has always been and will always be. So now I was being told that this whole “othering” based on the identity of a refugee was all simply made-up...a construct that had no basis in reality, a system of ideas produced by nationalism only a few centuries ago. Well now I was thoroughly confused. Perhaps my discomfort all along sprouted from this deeper understanding that we artificially label people to fit the ideas of our prescribed world and that the narratives that surround these labels are what eventually end up constituting reality.

My research focus has always been refugees, but the initial spurring of my idea for a thesis topic came to me when I was crossing the border from Jordan into the West bank through an Israeli checkpoint. The Israeli border authorities held me up for hours until the facility closed down as they questioned me about my studies at university and my relationship to Palestine. Once I had finally gotten into Palestine, a close friend of mine told me that the most dangerous threat to Israel was the Western activist, someone who would broadcast a different narrative to the West about what was happening in Israel. The control of the state depended on keeping a tight lid over the narrative that came out of Palestine as any shaking up of that narrative would disrupt people’s perceptions of what was actually happening on the ground, thereby muddying the static and one-dimensional narrative that was coming out of Israel and supported by American interests. This had me intrigued by the power of the word to not only control and create realities, but to also disrupt, resist, and empower.



Retrospectively, this paper is a product of my own recognition of my privilege and freedom of mobility. Furthermore, it is a questioning of how we live under an artificially constructed system that has rendered certain people who do not fit within the borders of our imagined reality as refugees only to parade the moral substance of our country when we accept them into our borders. I am aware that this thesis cannot begin to deconstruct such ideologies, but I hope it embodies a culmination of my own personal development over the course of my college career. Furthermore, I hope it pushes both myself and its readers to challenge institutional narratives and to add new dimensions to how we perceive systems of power and their constructions of reality.

### ***The Birth of International Human Rights—a Colonial Invention***

According to the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees, a refugee is an individual who has a “well- founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is out- side the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”<sup>1</sup> The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the institution that has taken on the responsibility of securing the rights of refugees globally, was created in 1950 in the wake of a surge in stateless people following the aftermath of World War II. From its conception, the Convention was limited in its scope to oversee the needs of a select few. The committee of the UNHCR was assembled in order to manage issues related to forced displacement in Europe. Very quickly, their role expanded to include the concerns of other populations outside of Europe as decolonization movements created huge numbers of other refugees in different parts of the world. Between 1951 and 1967, anticolonial movements were

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "The 1951 Refugee Convention." UNHCR. Accessed March 02, 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html>.

spreading across Asia and Africa as previously colonized people were politically mobilizing in an effort of achieving autonomy and independence. These struggles often resulted in new waves of displaced people. In 1967, the UNHCR decided to add on the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees to remove the geographical and temporal restrictions of UNHCR under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.<sup>2</sup> This Protocol was designed by the UN so that states could properly address the refugee problem on their own terms. It is important to address the historical context in which the UN began the conversation surrounding human rights in order to understand its purpose and functioning today.

The discourse around both refugees and international human rights began taking center stage at a time of decolonization when there was a worldwide call for a restructuring of power relationships between the colonizers and the colonized. To respond to this call, the UN proposed a new system of tackling human rights issues---one that was grounded in a “fidelity to the modern Western priority of that nation-state as the forum for rights.”<sup>3</sup> The UN, and the birth of the UNHCR, far from being “the forum of a new and liberatory set of principles” was actually an attempted reimposition of the colonial rule after the war. This calls into question the role of UNHCR in its present day function as a securer of rights. Upon further consideration of the historical context, it becomes clear that UNHCR serves as a colonialist tool to fortify states all while selectively advocating for international human rights. If we understand human rights language through a colonial lens then, it comes as no surprise that individual human rights are actually of very little concern to state actors who support international human rights language. These trends and hypocrisies are largely seen in the interviews of my research as refugees

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations. "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees." UNHCR. Accessed March 22, 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/basic/3b66c2aa10/convention-protocol-relating-status-refugees.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Moyn, 93

challenge institutions like the UNHCR to explain how states (and institutions that supposedly supersede states) neglect the needs of their communities.

The UNHCR website writes “UNHCR serves as the ‘guardian’ of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol. According to the legislation, States are expected to cooperate with us in ensuring that the rights of refugees are respected and protected.”<sup>4</sup> The UNHCR clearly articulates that their main mission is to serve as the guardian and defender for the rights of the displaced. In 2018, with a total worldwide displaced population of over 65 million, the UNHCR has an incredibly massive duty to support refugees in their access to human rights. The institution makes clear that it operates outside of states, as it functions above the state system itself. However, the UNHCR as an entity is comprised of members of states who rely on getting displaced people absorbed into states in order to obtain rights, thereby falling victim to state policies and state guidelines that dictate who is a member of a state and who can gain rights in the first place. This calls into question the flaws in an alleged human rights institution that accepts the notion that people are worthy of human rights based on their affiliation to a state, rather than based on their existence as a person in itself.

The discourse surrounding international human rights has largely been criticized as a colonial tool since its conception. This is most apparent in the way that the rise of the discourse surrounding international human rights came at a time when self-determination was slowly disappearing from UN talk. In fact, the birth of international human rights only showed up following World War II when representatives of European nations came together at the Human Rights Convention in 1948 and produced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Because discourse around human rights started as a colonial project rather than an effort to empower, “the

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations. "The 1951 Refugee Convention." UNHCR. Accessed March 22, 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/1951-refugee-convention.html>.

earliest formulations of human rights—up to and including the Universal Declaration—dropped self-determination.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, states’ discourse surrounding international human rights became a substitute for self-determination as state powers cared very little about actually securing individual rights. Rather, their focus was on creating a system that would allow continued control over colonized lands at a time when colonization, in its classical definition, was becoming dislodged in parts of Asia and Africa. This is apparent in the way that discussions that came out of decolonization varied between state powers involved in the UN setup of international human rights and the formerly colonized people themselves. Leaders of anti-colonialist movements in Ghana, Egypt, and India (just to name a few) all employed self-determination rhetoric to promote their cause. In fact, there is no record of prominent icons taking human rights rhetoric from the UN seriously as core language.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, state powers made the call for international human rights central to their foreign agendas following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, while completely ignoring the call for self-determination from the formerly colonized.

### ***Refugee—Victim or Terrorist?***

In light of the growing refugee problem and the heightened publicity around refugee communities today, this work aims to question the system of borders and states artificially constructed by imperial powers. Given the high focus of refugee issues in news media and political spheres, labels constructed around the forcibly displaced have developed to essentially “other” and created an outsider out of people. These narratives span the spectrum of passive victim to threatening terrorist. The official White House page under former President Barack Obama, for instance, titles its information sheet on the Syrian refugee resettlement program as

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<sup>5</sup> Moyn, 88

<sup>6</sup> Moyn, 92

“How We’re Welcoming Syrian Refugees While Ensuring Our Safety.”<sup>7</sup> What are the structural power inequities that allow nation-states to depict refugees as a security threat when they are actually fleeing the violence, and how does that affect the realities of refugees? How is it that refugees can go from victim to survivor then to villain, and how do those labels affect them personally? Why, on the other hand, is it beneficial to our nation-state agenda to depict some refugees as nothing but victims while ignoring the historical and political context that has degraded them to an existence of “bare life” in the first place? What does it mean to be stateless in this day and age and why have we allowed stateless to mean rightless? Many of the answers to these questions are grounded in narrative theory which explains that narratives are created by institutions of power to further consolidate control over their subjects.

According to the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory, social roles can be constructed in institutional narratives. These social roles help sustain power inequalities.<sup>8</sup> Given the high attention to refugee populations by the media and in political spheres, this research aims to analyze how these roles are constructed, naturalized, and challenged in refugee communities. It aims to explore how institutional narratives shape neo-liberal forms of control centered on human rights. These narratives shape feelings of the masses and create xenophobia. This work aims to analyze narratives coming from individual refugees themselves to explore their responses to these imposed stories about their communities. To understand how these systems of power work, I aim to share counter stories from refugee communities which are not acknowledged. These counter stories point to the way states are exploitative and use the commodification of suffering through the normative refugee asylum story to distance and other the marginalized.

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<sup>7</sup> "How We're Welcoming Syrian Refugees While Ensuring Our Safety." National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed April 17, 2018. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/11/17/how-were-welcoming-syrian-refugees>.

<sup>8</sup> Herman, David. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London: Routledge, 2010.

### ***Methodology and My Positionality***

To explore these themes, I interviewed 40 Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Amman, Jordan during the summer of 2018. Interviewees consisted of 17 males and 24 females, most of whom (n=34) were living in Hashemi Shamali, an area in East Amman where a considerable number of refugees live. 20 of the interviewees were Iraqi and the other 20 were Syrian. All of those I had interviewed had resettlement cases with the UNHCR and were waiting to hear back from the organization. The majority (n=32) stated that they were hoping to be resettled in either the U.S., Canada, Europe, or Australia. The refugees I interviewed represented a wide range of professions including teachers, inventors, tailors, doctors, military personnel, and farmers, just to name a few.

My aim in conducting these interviews was to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of refugees. I began each interview with a consent process in which participants agreed to be interviewed and audio recorded and were made aware that they could stop the interview at any time. I then explained that I was an American student interested in researching forced displacement. I made clear that I was not in a position to provide any humanitarian support and that I simply wanted to hear their story as they chose to tell it. The first prompt I began every interview with was “tell me about yourself.” The questions were not meant to retell stories of suffering, but a lot of suffering naturally did come out in these stories. Although I had emphasized that I was simply a student, lots of times, people would associate me as a representative of a foreign aid organization because of my American background. Through this lens, it understandable that many would immediately launch into their asylum story when we began the interview. Perhaps many thought I was involved in some kind of “truth-seeking” agency and that if I heard their stories I would be able to help or offer them resources.

This baseline prompt was then followed by a series of questions that were approved by the International Review Board prior to the beginning of my research. These questions were: How does the way your community members perceive you affect you? Are you content with the way others perceive you? What do you want people to know about you? What do you want the people in your community to know about you? What do you want an outsider who has never met you (e.g. an American student) to know about you? Are you content with your life right now? How do you see your life moving forward? What is in your future? These questions were all used as jumping points and most times conversations naturally unfolded from these questions. All of the interviews were conducted in Arabic, translated, then transcribed in English. Responses were then coded and analyzed in NVivo analysis.

### ***Iraqi and Syrian Refugees in the Jordanian Context***

According to a UNHCR mid-year report published in 2016, Jordan is the second largest refugee host worldwide.<sup>9</sup> The top five source countries of refugees coming in to Jordan are Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, and Sudan. It should be noted that Palestinian refugees are not included in these numbers due to the complex designation of Palestinian refugees under UNRWA. However, over 1.9 million Palestinian refugees live in Jordan and it is estimated that a majority of Jordanians are of Palestinian descent. There are about 700,000 registered refugees from Syria that have migrated to Jordan after the start of the civil war.<sup>10</sup> However, in total, it is estimated that there are well over two million displaced Syrians living in Jordan. According to rights organizations, humanitarian support for Syrian refugees falls drastically short of human rights standards with many refugees unable to get access to adequate food, running water, and

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<sup>9</sup> United Nations. "Mid-Year Trends, June 2016." UNHCR. Accessed April 17, 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/58aa8f247/mid-year-trends-june-2016.html>.

<sup>10</sup> "UNHCR Jordan Factsheet - June 2017." ReliefWeb. Accessed March 22, 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/unhcr-jordan-factsheet-june-2017>.

electricity. 93% of Syrians live under the poverty line and 78% are women and children.<sup>11</sup>

Another sizable refugee community in Jordan is displaced Iraqis who have largely been forgotten by international organizations because of the prolonged nature of the conflict in Iraq.<sup>12</sup> Since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, about 30,000 Iraqis have registered with the UNHCR as refugees in Jordan.<sup>13</sup> Similar to the case with Syrian refugees, however, numbers from the Jordanian government on displaced Iraqis in the country run much larger with estimates higher than 450,000. Similar to the situation of Syrian refugees, unemployment and poverty is of issue with Iraqi refugee communities as well.

Refugees in Jordan are typically not allowed to work, however some have taken up illegal forms of work and recent changes have allowed some Syrian refugees to obtain work permits. The Jordanian government partnered with the UNHCR in 2016 to begin a process of issuing work permits to Syrian refugees. Under this new policy, employers have a three-month grace period in which they can obtain work permits from the government to issue to Syrian refugees without charge.<sup>14</sup> This legal change was implemented to improve the economic condition of Syrian refugees in Jordan, but these measures have been marginally (if even at all) helpful. Despite these new changes, many Syrian refugees are not able to work as jobs are scarce and competition is intense due to the large influx of refugees and migrants into Jordan.

Furthermore, many employers discriminate against Syrians adding to the difficulty of obtaining

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<sup>11</sup> "UNHCR Jordan Factsheet - June 2017." ReliefWeb. Accessed March 22, 2018.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/unhcr-jordan-factsheet-june-2017>.

<sup>12</sup> "Amid Syrian Crisis, Iraqi Refugees in Jordan Forgotten." IRIN. June 06, 2016. Accessed March 22, 2018. <http://www.irinnews.org/feature/2013/06/06/amid-syrian-crisis-iraqi-refugees-jordan-forgotten>.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations. "Iraqis in Jordan: Their Number and Characteristics." UNHCR. Accessed March 22, 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/subsites/iraqcrisis/47626a232/iraqis-jordan-number-characteristics.html>.

<sup>14</sup> "ILO." Jordan Issues First-of-their-kind Work Permits to Syria Refugees in the Arab Region. August 09, 2017. Accessed March 22, 2018. [http://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_568722/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/news/WCMS_568722/lang-en/index.htm).



secure and stable employment. Iraqi refugees do not have any formal route to gain legal employment.

Both Iraqi and Syrian refugees feel marginalized and are uncertain about their futures because of their economic poverty, failure to integrate, and inability to resettle to a third country. Often painted as a security threat by Western powers and considered a strain on the infrastructure by the Jordanian government itself, many refugees are subject to social oppression and disparagement. Another challenge of integration lies in the education system. Many Syrian and Iraqi urban refugees do not have access to the public education system in Jordan. Although technically Iraqi and Syrian refugee children are given free enrollment in the public schools, many of the schools have reached capacity and are unable to accommodate them.<sup>15</sup> With the adults unemployed and the children unable to attend school, prospects for Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Jordan are slim and constantly in flux. The Jordanian government and its people have become skeptical about international promises to provide aid for refugees currently living in Jordan. Because of this, attitudes in the government and among the people have soured leading to worsening relations for refugees there.

Jordan is neither a signer to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees nor its 1967 Protocol.<sup>16</sup> This means that Jordan is not obligated to follow international law with regards to refugee rights. Despite this designation as a nonsignatory, Jordan ranks second in top refugee host countries worldwide and bears an incredible amount of global responsibility towards

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<sup>15</sup> Summers, Hannah. "Thousands of Syrian Children in Jordan's Za'atari Camp Missing out on Education." *The Guardian*. July 29, 2017. Accessed March 22, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/29/thousands-syrian-children-jordan-zaatari-camp-missing-education>.

<sup>16</sup> Sadek, George. *Legal Status of Refugees: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq*. December 01, 2013. Accessed April 17, 2018. <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/refugees/legal-status-refugees.php>.

refugees.<sup>17</sup> Because of its proximity to both crises in Iraq and Syria, Jordan has been under tremendous strain and the economic and social impact on the country has been immense. Given the scarce resources and low funding from international organizations for refugee support in the country, many believe that the current situation in Jordan is unsustainable. Without hope for a future in Jordan, many refugees are hopeful of resettling outside of Jordan. However, due to the high volume of cases and the extensive security screenings that many countries require before resettlement can be approved, resettlement is a far from a universally attainable solution. Globally, only approximately 0.5% of refugees will ever be resettled to a third country.<sup>18</sup> For those seeking to resettle to the United States, even those fortunate enough to be among the small percentage of people who get resettled must wait an average of 18 to 24 months from when they file their cases until resettlement.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Refugee Perspective Towards the West--Respect, Resentment, or Both?***

From these interviews, it can be gathered that for the large majority of refugees who hope to resettle to the West, their main priority is their children. All but one of every mother and father interviewed mentioned their children in their responses to what they imagine for their futures. Furthermore, many envision their new lives through the American dream when describing what they would like their future to look like. One interviewee was convinced that the U.S. would resettle him. He told me that the U.S. takes care of animals so of course we would look after his children. Despite this romanticized vision of America, a great deal of resentment towards the West marked the undertones of many interviews. Even refugees who resent the West, however,

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<sup>17</sup> "UNHCR Jordan Factsheet - June 2017." ReliefWeb. Accessed March 22, 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/unhcr-jordan-factsheet-june-2017>.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations. "Resettlement." UNHCR. Accessed March 22, 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/resettlement.html>.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of State. Accessed April 17, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/admissions/>.

continue to believe in the American dream and hope they can realize those aspirations to create a better life for their kids. Prioritizing the hopes and aspirations of their children, they continue to set their sights on moving to America, a land away from all of the suffering they have experienced in their home countries and in Jordan while waiting in the limbo period of resettlement.

The way resentment towards America is articulated is through an unease with the rise of Western power and a distrust of the military-industrial complex in the U.S. Many were specifically angered by the U.S. government and pointed out many of its hypocrisies with regards to human rights. One Syrian man who I interviewed asked me directly, “how can you see our suffering but take no action?” The counter-story here is not simply the widely-known suffering of refugees, but rather the story that disrupts the idea that America is uniquely good and a source of goodness in a world of evil. The counter-story is articulated in the way refugees voice their opposition to hegemony and American expansionism beyond its borders. It is revealed in the way they point out the aggressively imperialist policies of the U.S and take stabs at the idealism and philanthropy of the state when it is associated with capitalist greed and companies that have strong ties to pumping money to power. Moreover, many refugees described the way in which these systems have played out for much longer than just their lifetimes as they discussed American moral, economic, and systemic power as a global system extending over a period of centuries.

When I first noticed these seemingly contradictory trends in the interviews—that some are enamored by the West, many are resentful of the West, but nearly everyone wants to come to the West—I was confused as to what to make of it. During one of my interviews with a more affluent, Iraqi woman who lived in a luxury apartment in Swefieh, she told me that everyone is

enamored with the U.S. “because they’re poor and they don’t know any better--they don’t know what they’re saying, they just see a fancy car on TV and thinks that is what they will have when they make it to America.”<sup>20</sup> Reflecting on her words, I think it goes beyond that. “Poor” people are not simply stupid. American empire works by selling this image to the world while simultaneously destabilizing and extracting resources from the lands of those people. Yes, refugees want to resettle to the West while simultaneously voicing their unease about the current powerful Western states. HOWEVER, they say what they need to because they want stability and resources. In fact, it is not stupidity, but a means of survival and trying to make it in a largely inequitable world in which they must appease the very colonial powers they have been subjugated by.

There is immense value in just noting this dissonance and resentment because it destabilizes the idea that America is the land of the great, after all. Refugees may be desperate to come to the U.S. and fit this narrative of victimhood (as the media likes to portray), but the Iraqi and Syrian refugees I interviewed are also angered at the imperial policies that have led to their refugee status in the first place. Moreover, many discussed the ways in which the UNHCR does nothing for them or not enough. This implicates agencies that work for international human rights as well. Taking these counter-stories that oppose American hegemony into account is a first step in disrupting systemic power that relies on the rigid construction of a narrative of “good” surrounding the state and international agencies. During my journey to the West Bank, I noticed that Israel was so threatened by Western activists coming into its borders simply because the state needed control over the narrative. The Israeli state viewed subversion, a change in the narrative disseminated to the world, as the ultimate threat to their order and system. In this

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<sup>20</sup> Nadia. Interviewed by Author. July 14, 2017.

research, my main aim is to explore narratives of people who have often been denied permission to “narrate.” It aims to question systems that function on the unequivocal pitting of good versus evil and dissects how this affects the way human rights plays out on the ground. To be clear, I, of course, do not take my conclusions to be absolute nor do I suggest they are; this paper is simply an effort to begin understanding the topic at hand through an admittedly limited scope. For the purpose of maintaining privacy, I only include the first names of my interviewees and I have changed the names of all those who requested they be completely anonymous. Here are some of their thoughts they kindly shared with me.

## Chapter 1

### Borders--Tools of Control and Exclusion

Marium's apartment is on the fourth floor of an old building in the heart of Hashemi Shamali, a crowded district in East Amman where kids often wander the streets unattended and the constant advertising of street vendors selling their produce contributes to the background din. There are multiple pairs of colorful, scuffed up kids' shoes neatly arranged outside of Marium's apartment door. From the other side of the door, Marium yells in Arabic to wait a minute as she makes herself decent for her guests. Within moments she opens the door, slightly and hesitantly at first, but soon after recognizing her visitors, her face lights up into a gentle smile and she swings open the door. Marium is a radiant woman with golden skin and kind eyes. She speaks with a soft voice, but carries herself with a lot of poise and confidence. She wears a long cheetah print shirt that comes down to her knees, a navy blue maxi skirt that just barely brushes the ground as she walks, and a light blue hijab. The mother orders her daughter to set the water to boil for tea as she and her three other children sit down on the cushions on the floor. She pulls out three tiny glass tea cups and generously heaps in several teaspoons of sugar into each cup before pouring out the tea and stirring. After settling in with tea cups in hand, Marium begins to tell me, an American student, her story.

Marium is a thirty-year-old woman from Demascus, Syria. She is one of eight children and her father died when she was very young. She makes no mention of her mother throughout the interview. She loved school as child, but dropped out after eighth grade. She married when she was seventeen years old, but the marriage was not a happy one, as he often hit her and she bore almost all the responsibility of her children. She calls her life very "normal" until the revolution in Syria began in 2011. She recounts to me the day when the Syrian Free Army and

Bashar al Assad's army surrounded her village, "It was like the Day of Judgment. I can never forget it. The bombs, the bullets...it makes you forget even your parents. We all left, everyone in the village. Even the animals! Cows, dogs, horses, everyone took them because they [Bashar's army] were going to kill everything including the animals. All the people and humans, all walking in one direction on the road...I will never forget."<sup>21</sup>

Marium and her family moved from shelter to shelter and she believes it was fate that shielded her family and herself from all the tanks, snipers, and artillery from both Bashar's army and the rebels that constantly barraged her village. Confused as to how she could have possibly survived all the turmoil around her, she often mentions how gracious she is to *Allah Subhana Wa Ta'ala* (Glory to him, the Exalted) for protecting her and her family. By this time, her husband disappears from the story and she does not mention him again. Her journey over the border was marked with pain, hunger, and danger as she scavenged for food to provide for her children and did all she could to protect them from the violence that was imploding around them.

Marium and her family spent a night at Zaatari camp before her sister-in-law received them and had them moved into the home in Hashemi Shameli where she is living in now. As a single mom determined to provide for her family in a city she was a complete stranger to, she networked to find a job. Without formal education or a particular skill set, she found work as a caretaker for an elderly gentleman in the neighborhood. She continued with this work while simultaneously taking software and computer classes so that she could gain better employment. With her newfound skill set she was able to land a job in a library, and then in an office as an accountant. She explains to me that jobs were fleeting and impermanent especially for Syrians like herself so she had to be flexible and constantly learn new trades so that she could provide for

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<sup>21</sup> Marium. Interview by author. July 15, 2017.

her family. She explains that her endurance and hard work were simply a matter of survival and that reading the Quran helps her find solace to cope.

Marium speaks for over an hour without any prompting as her kids sit obediently in one corner shifting their stares between me and their mother. She explains that she rarely has anyone to speak to and feels lighter after sharing her experiences with others. She seems to use the interview as a means of catharsis and once she finishes, the room is heavy, but also surrounded by some kind of special energy in which all the blaring horns and vendors of the streets of Hashemi Shameli are silenced by the soft voice of this young woman. Marium had opened up her heart and in doing so had transported us to a new world where we, the people in the room, were now connected to her through the power of her words. Inspired by the strength and resilience of the woman who sat before me I ask at the end of the interview, “So what is your advice to the world?” Marium responds:

“I will say to the world, please stop fighting. There is enough fighting. We need peace. Every time I open the news I see pictures of bodies. It has become normal. We are going to lose our humanity getting used to these images. I wish the world peace. We need peace. When it comes to using social media, we are always writing that we love each other and that we love all of humanity. Stop lying. We say we love humanity, but we don’t even ask about our neighbor. Let’s be reasonable and live the reality. I want the world to know, don’t look at us, Syrians, as criminals. If we were criminals, why would we leave Syria? They should also know that we are human. The situation forced us to leave and try to find a place in Europe or America. We are equal to you. We are human. I don’t want you to think that when I say hi I want something from you. I just want to build a new relationship with you. I do not need anything from you. If I’m hungry don’t feed me, just treat me well. We just need to learn to treat each other well, that’s it. We are equal. I am happy you came here and listened to my story. Now I want to hear from you, what did you see from the Arab? Do you like our tradition and our hospitality?”<sup>22</sup>

On the very surface, Marium fits neatly into the Western imposed refugee narrative. She does her work, keeps her head down, and refuses to bring up overtly political critiques of the

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<sup>22</sup> Marium. Interview by author. July 15, 2017.



powers that have displaced her. But her perfect fitting into the Western imposed refugee mold explains what refugees must do in order to sustain themselves and their families. When I ask what she thinks the root of the violence in her country is she responds confusedly, shrugs her shoulders and says that “outsider powers who have their hands on Syria” are responsible. When further questioned who these “outside powers” are she just shrugs again and smiles slightly embarrassedly saying she does not know. Later my interpreter, Ammar, said she was afraid to be more specific as many refugee families are fearful of “getting involved with politics” because of their pending resettlement cases. This explains how refugees are expected to deal with their hardship without blaming or even considering the foreign powers that have put them in these exceptional situations. In order to acquiesce to the legal term as a persecuted person (and hence a refugee), she feels the need to offer up a particular narrative of her story and stray away from accusations against an imperialist system.

Despite Marium’s acquiescence to prescribed Western labels of refugeehood, my interview with Marium demonstrates the power of the word in not only constructing realities, but also pushing back against them and creating new ones. Language has the power of empowering people as it is able to legitimize, validate, or refuse certain ideas which end up playing a key role in the construction of self. On the surface level, Marium’s words could elicit pity as they mark those of a woman who has endured great hardship, has never obtained a formal education, and is living in a foreign country struggling to provide for her children. Yet, she refuses to accept charity or pity as she finds the idea degrading to her own self-worth. Despite the fact that her displacement story is marked by extreme adversity, she adamantly stands opposed to the narrative of victimhood that she feels others are imposing on her. She is aware of not only Western portrayals of her community, but also of how media affects the way mainstream

narratives can oversimplify nuanced, and highly complex personal stories. Therefore, she defies simple stereotypes about refugees, women, Muslims, and Arabs with her actions and consciously takes a stance of resistance by covertly articulating the ways in which systems of power can affect perceptions of herself and those within her community. At the same time, Mariam, in many ways, is able to support her family by avoiding overtly political talk. Others I interviewed, on the other hand, decided to make their frustrations heard.

Over the course of two months in the summer of 2017, I spoke with 40 people (20 Syrians and 20 Iraqis) who had fled either Iraq or Syria and were now living as urban refugees in Amman, Jordan. Of the 40 interviewees, 32 stated that they were looking for resettlement in either the U.S., Canada, or Australia. All of the interviewees were recognized as asylum seekers by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and were waiting on their cases for resettlement to a third country. The open ended prompt that I began every interview with, “tell me about yourself,” was almost always answered with a displacement story. Here I must acknowledge my role as a researcher and the proposed perception, from the side of the interviewee, with which I conducted the interview. Introducing myself as an American student interested in refugee rights, I gather many of my interviewees viewed me as some kind of truth-seeker aligned with either a nongovernmental organization or foreign aid group. They would often pleadingly describe to me why their case with the UNHCR should go through and why their story of displacement necessitated resettlement to a third country.

Yet, when asked about the root of instability in their respective countries, the overwhelming majority responded that outside meddling powers (particularly the United States) had destabilized their country. This dissonance between resentment towards the U.S. while simultaneous desperation to enter the country through a long and pain-staking resettlement

process further explains how inextricable the imperialist power web is in subjecting those within it. The subjugated often understands the power dynamics at play, but must still work within those in order to access rights, as is the case with refugees trying to resettle to a third country in the West. Anti-imperialist sentiment pervaded almost all the interviews in either outspoken and overtly critical ways or more diplomatic (or perhaps even fearful) critiques. Many interviewees demonstrated a keen political awareness and an insinuate that America played a role in destabilizing their county. Some interviewees were more reticent when we approached this topic sensing that their sentiments on the topic could impact their resettlement case. Other were more vocal about their criticisms and were insistent that I spread the “truth” to the American public.

The most powerful words of resistance came from a 53-year-old man from Baghdad, Iraq who implored me to spread the “true story” to the American public. Ghasan says,

“I am not giving you the details. I am just scratching the surface. I plan to hold a conference and host all the teachers, students, and press and I am going to tell them everything. If you know of any conference just call me and I will jump and come. I will tell them my entire story. If you want to film me, film me. I’m not just going to talk, I’m going to show you everything. All my reports, my wounds, everything...show it to the Americans. After two years in prison when the Americans released me, they said that they were sorry and that they were wrong. They told me that I should not have been jailed, but that was only after they destroyed my entire family! I believe there is no such thing as human rights. My case is just one of the millions of cases of Iraqis.”<sup>23</sup>

These articulations of resentment speak volumes to the fact that refugees are not simply passive victims or stoic objects of misfortune, but conscious resisters to a system that has displaced their physical bodies and objectified their personhood for useful tools of nationalism. Ghasan refuses to let these injustices go unseen.

The U.S. media very conveniently depicts refugees as victims desperately trying to enter its borders while ignoring America’s historical colonial injustices in the region. This narrow

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<sup>23</sup> Ghasan. Interview by author. July 1, 2017.

focus on the victimization of refugees and their desperation to come to America is often used to promote American exceptionalism as it plays well into the American nationalistic agenda in which outsiders are desperate to sacrifice their lives to make it to this sacred land and have a chance at the idealized American dream. Therefore, the refugee stereotypes played up by the media and state serve to play up America's own moral superiority while simultaneously othering those outside of its borders. However, these counter stories illustrate that that naïve thinking is only part of the story. Despite refugees' cognizance of America's role in their countries and their anti-imperialist feelings, 30 of the 40 respondents agree that they would like to move to the U.S., simply for the "future of their children." Ghasan, for instance, is one of these refugees who wishes to move to the U.S. with his family. This points to how Ghasan, and perhaps others like him, feel compelled to work within the system and provide certain narratives in order to obtain rights under an imperialist system that they believe has stolen their futures from them.

This paper seeks to analyze how imperialist powers obscure historical injustices and in the process, flatten refugee characters into simple victims or security threats. It seeks to illuminate how many believe the West is complicit in the displacement problem in the region and questions whether the system set forth to accept refugees serves to reinforce the standing power imbalances. Moreover, it seeks to illustrate how refugees are fully conscious of the role of foreign intervening powers in their current state of displacement. The first chapter shall provide context to America's relationship with Syria and Iraq to understand its role in these conflicts and then it shall investigate why depictions of victimhood are propagated by the media in ways that affect identity formation among refugees.

### *America and its "Invisible Hands"*

Although finding an exact estimate is difficult (both because refugee definitions vary and because of the complex designation of Palestinian refugees), it is estimated that out of a population of 9.5 million people, a third of the population of Jordan consists of people displaced by conflicts in the region.<sup>24</sup> All of the refugees interviewed had been given asylum seeker status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and were waiting to hear back from the agency on their case for resettlement. Globally, less than 1% of refugees are ever resettled to a third country.<sup>25</sup> Typically, refugees in Jordan are not allowed to work and face many forms of discrimination. A new law passed in Jordan in 2016, allowed employers to issue work permits to Syrians, but it has been marginally effective.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, many refugees are marginalized and are uncertain about their futures because of their economic poverty, dashed hopes to find employment, and inability to resettle to a third country. Often painted as a security threat by Western powers and considered a strain on the infrastructure by the Jordanian government itself, many refugees are subject to social oppression and disparagement.

About 730,000 registered refugees from Syria have migrated to Jordan after the start of the civil war that erupted out of protests that begin in Syria in March of 2011.<sup>27</sup> In 2011 a group of teenagers spray painted revolutionary slogans onto the wall of a school in Dara'a and Assad's security forces reacted by arresting and torturing the boys. This sparked several protests that eventually metastasized to the rest of the country and by 2012, both Damascus and Aleppo had

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<sup>24</sup> "Refugees constitute third of Jordan population - World Bank official." Jordan Times. December 19, 2015. Accessed October 29, 2017. <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/refugees-constitute-third-jordan-population-%E2%80%94-world-bank-official>.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Department of State. Accessed October 29, 2017. <https://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/>.

<sup>26</sup> Deutsche Welle. "Syrian refugees in Jordan find little benefit in working legally | Middle East | DW | 30.12.2016." DW.COM. Accessed October 29, 2017. <http://www.dw.com/en/syrian-refugees-in-jordan-find-little-benefit-in-working-legally/a-36943348>.

<sup>27</sup> "Operational Portal." Document - UNHCR Jordan - Fact Sheet - January 2017. Accessed November 14, 2017. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/53294>.

been sucked into the violence. It should be noted that prior to the Arab Spring, many Syrians were discontent with the leadership under Bashar al-Assad. Traces of resentment from the 74% Sunni Muslim minority towards the ruling Alawi sect that compromised only 12% of the population had lingered ever since 1970 when Bashar's father took office.<sup>28</sup> This Alawi political elite tolerated religious minorities for the most part, but made clear that they would silence any political dissidents. This suppression of peaceful political resistance (often through violent, state and police control) became hallmark of the Assad regime. This, along with the regime's disproportionately brutal attack against its initially peaceful civilian protesters, greatly shifted public opinion against Assad.

Amira, is a forty-four year from Homs, Syria. A slight woman, with a powerful presence, she offers her perspective on the situation before and after the 2011 revolution:

“Before there were problems but it all exploded after the revolution. Before, if you had any problems with the regime, immediately you would be punished. This was before the war. So we used to be careful. We knew the wall had ears and we could not even speak about the government between brothers and sisters. The government made our lives a constant suffering and the Sunnis were oppressed. So then began the revolution... We thought it was good for us because we were all suffering and it was nice because we could finally talk about our real feelings. The revolution was good in the beginning. Then the atmosphere changed. The motives changed. The revolution changed. Revolutionaries started to fight among each other. Before it was peaceful, but when they started shooting us civilians we knew everything was different.”<sup>29</sup>

The Syrian refugees I spoke to have differing opinions on the Bashar Al-Assad regime and their support for the resistance. However, almost all interviewees share similar sentiments of about the situation on the ground in Syria after the rebel groups fractured into a bloody jumble of rival groups and terrorizing soldiers. They were in agreement that violence was a product of foreign powers that were fighting a proxy war on their land. Many attributed the slaughter to the

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<sup>28</sup> Al Jazeera. "Syria's Civil War Explained from the Beginning." News | Al Jazeera. April 14, 2018. Accessed April 17, 2018. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Amira. Interview by author. July 19, 2017.

rise of ISIS, who they argued was the American created Al Qaeda, simply rebranded in Syria. Mohammad from Homs said, “We don’t know who the killers are anymore. It has all jumbled up. We do not know the truth...who belongs to Free Will or who belongs to Assad. It is all just a mess...the invisible hands control it all.”<sup>30</sup>

Many Syrians expressed their dissatisfaction with Obama on his inability to come through on his promise to act when Assad crossed the “redline” of using chemical weapons on civilians. Because of the conflicting interests of Russia, U.S. and Iran, what had begun as a collective resistance against a heavily controlling state under Assad very quickly unraveled into a disjointed milieu of senseless violence as these powerful nations began arming and training rebels. Mohammad from Homs and many others explained that the situation had become what it was because of the foreign interventions of imperialist countries “playing power games” on their land. The result of such destabilizing turmoil is 4.8 million Syrian refugees and 6.6 million displaced civilians within Syria itself.<sup>31</sup> Mohammad explains how no one was immune to the bullets and trust between neighbors vanished overnight in Syria.<sup>32</sup> And now, refugees in Jordan are still in a state of insecurity. Many, like Mohammad, who consider themselves “lucky” enough to have escaped the violence and to have made it across the border into Jordan face extreme hardship in their new host country. According to Human Rights Watch, humanitarian support for Syrian refugees falls drastically short of human rights standards with many refugees unable to get access to adequate food, running water, and electricity.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Mohammad. Interview by Author. July 16, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) - Norwegian Refugee Council. "Syria." IDMC » Syria. Accessed April 17, 2018. <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/syria/>.

<sup>32</sup> Mohammad. Interview by Author. July 16, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> "Jordan." Human Rights Watch. January 12, 2017. Accessed October 29, 2017. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/jordan>.

Still, there are other vulnerable populations living in Jordan. Among them are the Iraqi refugees who have been largely forgotten by international organizations because of the prolonged nature of the conflict in Iraq. Since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq to depose of the then-incumbent president, Saddam Hussein, about 30,000 Iraqis have registered with the UNHCR as refugees in Jordan. Similar to the case with Syrian refugees, however, numbers from the Jordanian government on Iraqi refugees run much higher.<sup>34</sup> The Iraqi refugees I interviewed had all fled at varying points since the 2003 invasion and they all share a similar perspective to the Syrians in that they feel as though the violence in their homes has become indiscriminate due to the destabilization of their country by outsider powers. When I visit Nadia, a 54-year-old Iraqi woman with dyed-blond hair in her luxurious apartment in West Amman, she describes to me her Iraq before and after the war:

“I have no opinion about them [the Ba’athi party] and Saddam. They were nothing. They were normal and life was fine. I was not Ba’athi, but I had a job and was treated just fine. Of course in America you just heard the media. The reality was that if you stayed away from him [Saddam Hussein] and his government and you didn’t speak badly about politics then you will be fine. You just can’t speak out against him. No one heard the words Sunni or Shia, Christian or Muslim. There were no problems with that. Even before during the time of the kingdom! There were no divides ever. In 2003 it all changed. They [the Americans] wanted to divide and conquer us. It’s an English phrase, isn’t it? Now all that is left is a bunch of thieves, criminals, and extremists.”<sup>35</sup>

Here Nadia demonstrates her sentiments of frustration and resentment against the American decision to intervene in her country. She explains to me that the U.S. mission to bring “democracy to the Middle East” was all a farce. She questions how it was the U.S. had brought democracy to the Iraqi people when they no longer have any sovereignty over their land. In fact, to her and many Iraqis, Iraq has become a “doll controlled by Western powers” who had their

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<sup>34</sup> "Amid Syrian crisis, Iraqi refugees in Jordan forgotten." IRIN. June 06, 2016. Accessed October 29, 2017. <http://www.irinnews.org/feature/2013/06/06/amid-syrian-crisis-iraqi-refugees-jordan-forgotten>.

<sup>35</sup> Nadia. Interviewed by Author. July 14, 2017.



hands on Iraqi oil.<sup>36</sup> During Saddam's time, she explained, "they [the U.S. and Britain] could not get any oil from us." Now, she explained, American and British companies have a completely monopoly over the oil as it is no longer in the government's hands.<sup>37</sup> Since 2003, the death toll in Iraq has risen to half a million, 2.3 million have been rendered external refugees, and 1.7 million are designated as internally displaced people.<sup>38</sup> Similar to the case with Syrian refugees, unemployment and poverty is an issue with Iraqi refugee communities living in Jordan as well. Humanitarian support for Iraqis is dismally low especially from the international community.<sup>39</sup> Due to the prolonged nature of the conflict, many Iraqis feel forgotten and abandoned with little hope for resettlement after waiting for a decade or even more in this transition state in their first country of asylum. What primes a state to justify all of this destruction and prolonged suffering?

### ***Nationalism: A Framework for Military Intervention and Refugee Exclusion***

The political theorist, Hannah Arendt, best describes the atmosphere following World War II as one in which the spread of civil war and the magnitude of displacement reached historically unprecedented levels. Tightened borders meant groups of migrants were now welcomed nowhere. She writes, "once they had left their homeland they remained homeless, once they had left their state they became stateless; once they had been deprived of their human rights they were rightless, the scum of the earth."<sup>40</sup> Here, Arendt calls attention to the way the nation-state has become the delivery system for rights under the current system. Hence, by describing the stateless as "scum of the earth" she describes how being expelled from one's nation in today's political climate means being expelled from humanity itself. Even criminals

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<sup>36</sup> Nadia. Interviewed by Author. July 14, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Nadia. Interviewed by Author. July 14, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> "Iraq: the Human Cost." MIT. Accessed October 29, 2017. <http://web.mit.edu/humancostiraq/>.

<sup>39</sup> "Iraq: the Human Cost." MIT. Accessed October 29, 2017. <http://web.mit.edu/humancostiraq/>.

<sup>40</sup> Arendt, 287.

had better access to rights as they were at least recognized by the law. The unquestioning acceptance of the ideology of the nation-state has created a rigid system of borders that justifies the stripping of human dignity in the name of the nation-state. Refugees, and especially asylum seekers, as those living on the cusp of statelessness, are constantly threatened of having their humanity deprived and their rights stripped from them. Stemming from the ideology of nationalism comes the assertion that only people of the same national origin can enjoy the protection of legal institutions, which adds another layer to who can be accepted as a citizen. Refugees, as the legal other, are therefore put under pain-staking screening processes and are subjugated to intense questioning in which they must prove their loyalty to the state.

The rise of the nation-state system has been largely successful in consolidating power for the sake of control and efficiency.<sup>41</sup> This power relies heavily on the control of words and ideas to essentially create or support ideologies that best support the state's interest. Kavanaugh describes ideology as an "especially coherent and rigidly held system of political ideas."<sup>42</sup> Within the framework of today's world of nation-states in high competition with each other, states rely on the fortification of the borders and the heavy control of the populations within those borders to exert control over the people within them. Contrary to popular belief, however, states exert their influence through the power of the word (that is, stories and narrative) to reinforce ideologies informed by racism and xenophobia. The institutional narrative, therefore, is an incredibly powerful tool of the state, as it coerces members of the community to imbibe and believe the mission of the state. Only when those narratives are threatened do states resort to the forceful control (through a strong military or a heavy police force, for instance).

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<sup>41</sup> Scott, 44

<sup>42</sup> Kavanaugh, 306

Following World War II, the ideology of nationalism infiltrated the state to such a degree that the nation had, in fact conquered, the state. Arendt asserts that this conquering resulted in the “transformation of the state from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation” and that at point, national interest had priority over the law.<sup>43</sup> This manifests itself in the way nationalism has become a part of our legal framework so that the law can work to exclude those who do not fit. Hence, operating within state law, cases taken up by the UNHCR are subject to these exclusion processes. The official refugee resettlement program of the U.S. state which works in conjunction with the UNHCR uses a legal framework to essentially decide who the state wants in and who it wants out. The greatest threat of nationalism is that it operates under the presumption that one nation and group of people are entitled to the rights and privileges that are afforded by citizenship over another group of people. Therefore, the over-taking of the state by nationalism has created a system whereby exclusionary policies have become law. Only through a very extensive vetting process can refugees obtain the rights of citizenship, and even then, they are considered to fall within the rule of exception. The immense power of the nation-state hence only serves to fortify power structures by affecting marginalized communities disproportionately.

The 2016 U.S. presidential election is a prime example of the ideology of nationalism affecting state function and creating a polarizing atmosphere to divide people and reinforce borders. How to deal with the refugee question became a divisive issue among the American public. Proposed solutions to the “refugee problem” ranged from a total ban to selective acceptance depending on a multitude of factors including country of origin and even religion. To further these varying agendas, the political sphere along with the wider public began campaigns

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<sup>43</sup> Arendt, 275.

of depicting refugees that aligned with their political interests. Conservative factions often played up the need to secure our borders through the depiction of refugees as potential terrorists seeking to scheme their way into the country, attack innocent civilians, and displace our traditional American values. For instance, on January 27, 2017, President of the United States, Donald Trump, signed an executive order to ban all refugees from entering the country “to keep radical Islamic terrorists” out of the United States.<sup>44</sup> Liberals, on the other hand, while not completely rejecting the “bad refugee” stereotype, advocated for a more open system of vetting and accepting displaced people. The cascade of images of refugees floating in boats in the middle of the sea, washed up bodies of dead children, crying kids in Aleppo matted in saw dust and blood, for instance, all played on the emotions of the wider public to counter the anti-refugee sentiment that had been growing in the country. However, the narrow focus on the pure victimization of refugees became more of a strategy to oppose political opponents rather than to draw attention to larger structural issues that rendered people as illegal, homeless, displaced, and outside the system in the first place. Thus, even the “pro-refugee” rhetoric and imagery became a disparaging tool of lessening the worth of the other all while promoting the nationalism of our country and prioritizing the worth of our own American values over others.

### ***Portrayal of Victimhood and Damaged Identities***

Sociologist and philosopher, Hilde Lindemann, argues that marginalized individuals’ actions and attitudes are largely constructed around outsider perceptions that infiltrate and become incorporated into the consciousness of the subjugated individual.<sup>45</sup> Through the power of nationalism, states exert immense control over societal perceptions of marginalized communities.

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<sup>44</sup> Merica, Dan. "Trump signs executive order to keep out 'radical Islamic terrorists'." CNN. January 30, 2017. Accessed November 15, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/27/politics/trump-plans-to-sign-executive-action-on-refugees-extreme-vetting/index.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Nelson, 24

Ideologies embedded in the power of the nation-state are propagated by organizations like the UNHCR who adopt these narratives to determine who fits the mainstream definition of a “refugee.”<sup>46</sup> Definitions become damaging to those who have little political voice when refugees feel obliged to adopt these static and one-dimensional stories in order to gain secure access to rights under a system that insists one must belong to a nation-state in order to be eligible for rights in the first place.<sup>47</sup> The interviews reveal how refugees often construct identities or resist those identities pushed on them despite the limitations created by political boundaries and state borders.

Nadir is a middle-aged man from Homs, Syria whose smile extends to his eyes and who speaks animatedly using exaggerated hand gestures. He holds himself up on one crutch as he stands half-paralyzed from the waist down. He explains to me both his desperation to find a new home after the violence in Syria and his refusal to be acknowledged by the West as simply a victim of his circumstances:

“Tell them that they are not God. Your country is not a heaven. Believe me, back in Syria our lives were amazing. We would never knock on your door. Now we have been ruined and you don’t accept us. This is not right, we are human. This is not humanity. Believe me I was young when I started to work as a tailor. I created a machine. I engineered it myself and made a plan and map and everything. We asked the Japanese to help us construct this machine. So believe me, we are not stupid, we are smart and capable. We need your help because of the situation we are in. We would never have knocked on your door before.”<sup>48</sup>

Nadir’s ideas of self-worth demonstrate how identity is not just something that is self-constructed or a product of one’s own constitution. Whether conscious or not, Nadir is constructing his identity through the negotiation of his own ideas of himself along with outsider perceptions of himself. Moreover, his acknowledgement of and rejection of perceptions he

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<sup>46</sup> Woolley, 3

<sup>47</sup> Paik, A. Naomi

<sup>48</sup> Nadir. Interviewed by author. July 7, 2017.

conveys as coming from the West manifest the incredible way that identity operates across borders. Our ability to see ourselves is a fluid, ever-changing negotiation of our own experiences in conversation with outsider influence. With such a large focus emphasized by the nation-state on the exceptional aspect of refugees, it is no surprise that refugee self-identity is constantly in flux the same way that their residence and physical living situation is. The political climate has essentially put an entire group of people—refugees—under a microscope to carefully scrutinize. This special attention certainly has heavy implications on the identity formation of refugees as they have to construct their sense of self under a magnifying glass as do all other marginalized groups in the United States.

Lindemann defines personal identity as developing through a complex interaction between outsiders' perspectives and one's own ideas of him or herself in conversation with each other. Perceptions are very much related to ideologies as state power relies on the blind acceptance of an idea and a very narrow perspective from the mainstream community itself, in order to function. The outsider perceptions are very often largely constructed and swayed by institutions of power, in this case the nation-state, who often wield the authority to speak on behalf of those whose voices have been quietened. Through the power of ideology, a society can create a solidified perception of an entire community without ever questioning the power of the state in constructing that narrative in the first place. Hildemann writes about the power of perceptions in influencing behavior towards a marginalized community. Negative societal perceptions have grave impacts as they can determine who is given refugee status, who is resettled, and who is eventually given a chance at recreating a life in a new land away from home. Therefore, states and institutions of power that act in the interest of the state (such as the

media and often international agencies) can construct narratives about marginalized communities that serve to reinforce the standing power dynamics.

The role of media in constructing narratives cannot be overstated. We are currently witnessing one of the worst displacement crises in history with over 60 million refugees and just about everyone (or so it seems) is enamored by simply the term “refugee.” YouTube reported a 224% increase in refugee-related searches in 2016, an unsurprising fact stemming from the divisive atmosphere of the U.S. elections.<sup>49</sup> The buzzword “refugee” captured everyone’s attention and every politician was expected to take a stance on the matter. This begs the question of why the refugee influx and the movement of people across borders was being posed as a “problem” that needed to be contained. Of course, the rise of civil wars and instability that had created unprecedented numbers of displaced people is of utmost concern. However, it is important to note here that although every politician had some stake in the matter and proposed his or her own solution to the refugee problem, the concern was over the people migrating rather than the violence and instability that had driven them from their homes in the first place. The problem was often framed as a problem of containment due to the masses of people moving across borders rather than the gross human rights abuses that were displacing people at historically unprecedented levels. The real obsession and hysteria over the “refugee problem” both in the U.S. and European countries seems to stem from the fact that the refugee poses a threat, a strange deviance from the nation-state norm. The refugee was an “undeportable” population so the state could not simply throw them out. However, according to nationalistic ideology, these people were “scum of the earth,” who could not simply be let in because they

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<sup>49</sup> "YouTube Reports 224% Jump in Refugee-related Searches since Start of Elections." Search Engine Land. March 25, 2016. Accessed April 17, 2018. <https://searchengineland.com/refugee-crisis-drives-largest-increase-election-related-searches-youtube-245905>.

were miscreants and terrorists or at the very least, a strain on our collective society and infrastructure.<sup>50</sup> This is what was at least being told to us under the nationalist ideology that had overrun the state and infiltrated our legal system.

The “refugee problem,” in essence, is the dissonance that results from the need to secure our borders, but not neglect our duties as part of the international community to bear the burden and follow international law concerning nonrefoulement. Upon further inspection, it seems that this discord stems from a structural issue rather than the impossibility of a sustainable solution. In other words, the whole system of nation states and boundaries is so flawed that the slightest imbalance, the introduction of a new people puts a sudden stopper to the entire flow of the system and when that cannot be contained, the entire framework comes crumbling apart. Such is the nature of an imagined, extensively intricate system of nations, laws, and borders whose arbitrariness is both where its power lies and also where its weakness can be seen. Hannah Arendt blatantly exposes the problem, “Since the Peace Treaties of 1919 and 1920, the refugees and the stateless have attached themselves like a curse to all the newly established states on earth which were created in the image of the nation-state.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, as long as we have nation-states and borders we will have refugees.

### ***Statelessness as “Rightlessness”***

This discourse between conservatives and liberals on matters of refugee admissions brings to light how much we are willing to compromise on our American nationalism and supposed values to incorporate new people within our imagined community. Those who espouse anti-refugee sentiment believe that sympathy towards refugees could be overlooked for the sake of continuing our sacred way of life as Americans. The ideology of nationalism convinces the

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<sup>50</sup> Arendt, 287

<sup>51</sup> Arendt, 290.



American public that we need to think twice about whose interests we need to serve first. This obsession over the “refugee problem” in contemporary politics is indicative of the threat statelessness poses to the current system as it stands. The stateless are so outside of the nation-state and of our understanding of what constitutes our current framework that a person who does not fit within it immediately becomes a malady that needs treatment. The power of this ideology lies in the belief that only nationals could be citizens, that these citizens are the one who need to be prioritized as needing protection under law, and that the only way to accept a person of different nationality relies on a law of exception.<sup>52</sup> Refugees are the perfect example of people who live outside of any one state but are hence taken in through the law of exception. Therefore, acceptance of a person without home is not a matter of duty but a matter of exception that the state can determine the parameters of. For a person of different nationality to obtain citizenship and be considered within the protection of the state, he or she must assimilate into the adopted country and completely divorce him or herself from his or her country of origin. This is the power of the ideology of nationalism at work.

Within the current system set forth by international law and the U.S. government, a person is essentially rightless without legal residence or citizenship. Refugees, as legally defined, are people without home, who need to assert that they require a home to have access to rights in the first place. Hannah Arendt writes that displaced (just like everyone else) are convinced that “true freedom, true emancipation, and true popular sovereignty could be attained only with full national emancipation, that people without their own national government were deprived of human rights.”<sup>53</sup> Najla, a heavier, wide-set woman from Baghdad, understands that her daughter will not have any rights under the Jordanian law until she is able to obtain a birth

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<sup>52</sup> Arendt, 284

<sup>53</sup> Arendt, 290

certificate for her. She sits on a plush chair with her daughter, Naba, on her lap. Naba is two years old, has tight curls, and wears pink nail polish on her fingers and toes. Najla tells me about her life in Iraq, the need to adapt to life here in Jordan, and her daughter's citizenship standing in the way of her goals:

“My daughter, Naba, was born here and Jordan refuses to give her citizenship. We went to the Iraqi embassy and asked her to be registered as an Iraqi. They told me we had to go back to Iraq and do the procedure in Iraq. But we can't even go back to Iraq because she has no passport or any document to say she even exists. So now we have to live here without her identity...I want the other countries to take my children. Leave us here, but let my kids go. What have my kids done to have them punished to stick here in this country? My Iraqi neighbor came here when she was just married and then had a child here in Jordan. Every time she took her kid to school they asked for his birth certificate. They kicked him out when they didn't have anything and now they have nothing.”<sup>54</sup>

Najla is frustrated with the lack of state recognition for her daughter. It is a severe obstacle to not only her family's mobility, but also her daughter's basic access to state-run institutions like primary school. She fears that her daughter, Naba, will have to go through similar obstacles to access as her neighbor's family did. Najla's daughter's lack of acknowledgement from the state, and hence exclusion from basic rights, points to the reality that the nation-state has become the sole-deliverer of human rights. Furthermore, for a stateless person to assert his or her own rights becomes a transgression of the law in itself. Therefore, such consolidated power under the nation-state is shaken by those outside the system who demand rights.

According to Marxist literary theory, ideology is very much tied to the social structure of a society. Those with political and economic power are very much able to create and uphold ideologies. States depends on the continuation of the embedded social structure to maintain

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<sup>54</sup> Najla. Interviewed by author. July 2, 2017.

power and that social structure is very much fortified by those who have a monopoly over the story that is shared to the wider world.<sup>55</sup> According to Kavanaugh, brute force on the part of the state through a powerful military or a strong police force is not an efficient method of control. Instead the perpetuation of the social structure and power dynamics that be are best fortified by a unified public perception of fairness, especially from those who are subjugated. Moreover, ideologies that instill xenophobia are especially useful for the state in “othering” those who do not fit neatly into the nation-state fold in order to reproduce the power of the nation-state itself.<sup>56</sup> By obliterating any sense of nuance or multi-layered meaning, states can reinforce power structures that best serve their interests.

Moreover, to further amass power and disregard those who deviate from the norm, nation-states often simplify narratives to develop static, one-dimensional stories around people who do not fit. Dawn Chatty addresses how refugees pose a threat to the consolidated power of the state as they represent ““liminal or interstitial nodes within the natural order.”<sup>57</sup> That is, because refugees present an obstacle to the mission of state-building as their identities do not necessarily fit within the imagined community, states have constructed methods of accepting and integrating refugees, but they do so through a process of control and identity manipulation so as not to disrupt the power of the state and the state’s mission of control, consolidation of power, and reproduction of the imagined community within its borders. Simplifying the personhood of a refugee then becomes an efficient way of control that has damaging effects on the refugee him or herself.

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<sup>55</sup> Kavanaugh, 307

<sup>56</sup> Agnew, 113

<sup>57</sup> Chatty, 296

Nations have come to accept refugees, but their lives are under the law of exception. Rather than disrupting and questioning the rigid nation-state system, states have developed methods of absorbing refugees. However, these will never be fully comprehensive and solve an issue when the entire framework is at fault. Institutions like the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) operate within the nation-state model and since 1951 have defined a refugee through the single definition outlined by Article I of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Under this document, the refugee, as defined as a person having a “well- founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion,” is almost completely restricted in mobility and at the mercy of the nation-state.<sup>58</sup>

This entire discourse around the status of a refugee is very much centered around the state and fortifies the presumption that national belonging is the precursor for access to rights. The Convention addresses, yet does not challenge, the way the stateless are subject to the laws of states while simultaneously not entitled to the protections of any state. The Convention urges states to accept refugees based on the agreed upon definition of a refugee, but still enables state actors to act as “truth-seekers” to determine who is in fact eligible for this status.<sup>59</sup> The idea that there is one objective truth encourages refugees to lose nuance within their story in order to obtain rights through state acceptance of their story and their person. Such simplifications of narrative are threatening to the refugee him or herself as it results in the loss of personhood, nuance, and complexity. Essentially, the definition that states have agreed upon through the 1951

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<sup>58</sup> U.S. Congress. *Handbook on procedures and criteria for determining refugee status: under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees*. Cong. Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1992.

Article 1

<sup>59</sup> Woolley, 4

Convention on what constitutes a refugee allows states to use lots of flexibility in determining who exactly fits this model and enables them to heavily vet supposed refugees through stringent fact-finding processes. This search for truth in a highly complex and nuanced world only serves to simplify and create static characters out of individual people. Furthermore, only when this imagined truth is found according to states and the UNHCR, is refugee status awarded and do states issue out travel documents which give a refugee the freedom of mobility and access to the rights that are predicated on the basis of state belonging in the first place.

The “idealized refugee personhood” created by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees insists that those who are forcibly displaced must fall within the parameters outlined for them to be absorbed by the state.<sup>60</sup> In times of desperation, refugees center their life stories around these narratives in the hopes of being accepted as a refugee as the state defines it. And finally, when/if they do, they are implicitly accepting their identity under this narrative of victimhood. Doing so often necessitates a stripping of nuance and a loss of personhood. Furthermore, states and agencies aligned with them are heavily implicated in perpetuating the narrative of victimhood as their rights discourses rely almost completely on state power and influence. The projection of victimhood in order to fall within the state becomes a damaging identity to one who has been forcibly displaced.

In the case of refugees who exist outside of the nation state system, organizations like the UNHCR create identities on their behalf under the framework of the nation-state itself. Therefore, for the UNHCR to function, it must recognize a person as stateless and then have that person either repatriated or naturalized so that they do not live in the margins anymore. Only then are rights afforded to that previously stateless individual. For the sake of state recognition

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<sup>60</sup> Woolley, 1

and the access to rights, refugees externalize these beliefs. Refugees need to prove that they are in fact stateless to obtain the protection of another state. They also must demonstrate lack of responsibility over their situation. Because they need to prove this innocence, they are ultimately framed as guilty until proven innocent and must go through a truth-seeking process to have their claim for asylum granted. Demonstrations of victimhood greatly affect agency as it perpetuates the already existing power relationship between the rightless and those institutions that bestow power.

The UNHCR's serving as "truth finders"<sup>61</sup> persuades refugees that they have to frame their narratives through a lens of victimhood in order to gain credibility and the access to rights. My role as a researcher and my interviewees' attitudes toward me revealed the ways in which refugee communities externalize these damaged identities. They repeat the motions that agencies require of them to demonstrate their exceptional status as a "refugee." Najla and many others understand that the deprivation of legality is akin to the deprivation of all rights simply because they no longer belong to any community whatsoever. Hannah Arendt writes, "Their [the stateless] plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed but that nobody wants even to oppress them."<sup>62</sup> To combat this damaged identity, the oppressed may use what Hildemann calls a counter story, which is a story that aims to recapture respect from the master narrative that has been pushed on them in the first place. Counter stories are hence used as a form of resistance and empowerment and can be used as a tool to regain control from an imposed master narrative.

## ***Conclusion***

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<sup>61</sup> Woolley, Agnes. "Narrating the "Asylum Story": Between Literary and Legal Storytelling." *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, October 17, 2016, 4

<sup>62</sup> Arendt, 296.

The palpable resentment among refugee communities begs the question of whether a sustainable solution to the refugee influx is, in fact, attainable. What does it mean if we, as a nation, continue to accept refugees while ignoring our own complicity in the root of their displacement? As the current systems stands, refugees feel compelled to offer up narratives of victimhood and may even obscure their anti-West frustrations in order to gain a path to resettlement. In turn, states like the U.S. will play up refugee victimhood and ignore voices of dissent. However, how is this refusal of recognizing their resentment and their legitimate distrust of imperialist powers throwing a Band-Aid on a problem without acknowledging the root of the issue? Is the refugee influx really a new problem or the consequences of historical injustices that are coming back to haunt the instigators? Is the acceptance of refugees without a legitimate acknowledgement of the injustices that have displaced them or an analysis of the rigid system of borders that have rendered them homeless in the first place fair or is it simply a ruse to parade the moral substance of our nation for generously extending a helping hand? What does it mean, that because of our imperialist tendencies, trust has been lost between nations, and what does it mean for the future of all those who come through America's doors?

My next chapter serves to analyze how refugees respond to imposed narrative about their communities. It shall explore both the acquiescence and resistance of refugee voices and expand on how counter stories are used to push back against the victimhood narrative. How has the legal term refugee conflated into a cultural term, often manipulated by the West for political gain and how do refugees resist succumbing to the cultural term? How are rights organizations and the UNHCR implicated in this narrative, and what impact does this have on the refugee him or herself? Finally, chapter two shall analyze the distinction between charity and solidarity and shall

explore the ways in which the “othering” of refugees preserves the power imbalances reinforced by the nation-state.



## Chapter 2

### The Counter-Narrative--Destabilizing American Exceptionalism

I would like to return to Maryam's story to explain the power of the master narrative. The master narrative creates an idealized image of what a "good" refugee should look like. It strips away nuance and complexity from the marginalized individual as it limits what characterizes a good, law-abiding citizen. In this case, a "good" refugee is one who falls neatly into the narrative of victimhood while never (outwardly) questioning the state or system of boundaries that exist on the basis of exclusion in the first place. Master narratives essentially create limitations on what it means to be a "good refugee" and this "good refugee" portrayal is tied into who is accepted or denied refugee status and for the lucky few, resettlement. Maryam, understanding this, acquiesces to this image in order to try to gain rights and security for herself and her family. The far-reaching power of the master narrative can therefore affect a person's right to movement and access to rights.

In her book *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, Hilde Lindemann Nelson explains how marginalized individuals create counter narratives to resist damaged identities under an oppressive master narrative.<sup>63</sup> A good counter master challenges what constitutes the master narrative and provides evidence to the moral agency of a refugee whether or not he or she falls within the framework of the "good" refugee archetype. Therefore, the counter narrative becomes a tool for the oppressed to resist a powerful system that inhibits their own sense of self so that they do not necessarily have to give in to narrow archetypes that simply serve the interests of the state.

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<sup>63</sup> Nelson, 40

### *Resentment in Counter-Narratives*

Ghasan, a 53-year-old male from Baghdad, Iraq is a refugee seeking resettlement in the United States who uses the counter narrative to explicitly articulate his grievances. Both he and Maryam have their hands tied, per se, as they are aware that their access to rights can be threatened based on what they choose to say or not say. However, this knowledge does not hold back Ghasan from expressing his true sentiments. Ghasan, a heavy set man with a crooked nose and missing teeth, speaks animatedly and uses exaggerated hand gestures to emphasize his point. He unabashedly waves an accusatory finger at the American military who he calls out as the source of his and his family's suffering. He explains that prior to the American invasion, sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shias in Iraq was basically nonexistent. Now the violence has turned the whole country into "animals."<sup>64</sup> Ghasan, a Sunni, was arrested and imprisoned by the Shia militia.

"They threw me in jail, they tortured me, they treated me badly. I was hurting so badly. They took my nails, they broke my bones, they took my teeth. They used the drill in my back and they used electricity on me. I spent 8 months alone in solitary confinement. I don't want to think back about this because I don't want to remember what happened to me. I will get angry. After they released me I became crazy and tired."<sup>65</sup>

Ghasan further went on to explain that the suffering has continued here in Jordan where his family gets no support from humanitarian relief agencies. He is also resentful of the UNHCR who has not provided any updates on his case for resettlement since 2013.

"What is your president doing? Where are our rights? You destroyed our country. Go tell your parents and your neighbors what our situation is like. Is this the human rights you are talking about in the United States? It is not our fault. We, as a family, are destroyed. What about our children? Why did they let us come to Jordan and tell us they were going to protect us and take us to the States? In the end this card gives us no protection. *Ghasan picks up his family's UNHCR paper that was in a plastic sleeve and then hastily throws it aside.* This is not right. We do not have money. Tell us, what's the reason? What's the future? Our issue is to know if we will leave or stick here. Let us settle down. If we're

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<sup>64</sup> Ghasan. Interview by author. July 1, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Ghasan. Interview by author. July 1, 2017.

going to stay here in Jordan, then I will seek for some way to live. But don't give me hope and keep me waiting. Just tell me if I'm going to stay here and die here, just tell me so I will know.”<sup>66</sup>

Ghasan articulates what he perceives to be a dissonance between the façade of support for human rights in the West and the actual actions of the leadership in the Western world. His current predicament along with his perception of hypocrisy in the West incline him to mistrust the agencies which previously said they were there to “support” him. Shortly after, Ghasan explains to me that he has lost hope altogether. He says Iraq is going to “become worse than it is now” and that the UNHCR would never accept his family’s case for resettlement because they are trying to “mess” him up by finding the inaccuracies in his story. He is now stuck in limbo here in Jordan for an undetermined period of time, unable to work, and quickly losing money to send his children to school.

“Do you know when your father married your mother? It took you a moment to think of the answer, didn't it? I asked you this to show you that sometimes any one of us may forget some days. Imagine, they keep asking me about things that happened 40 years ago! They ask me who my friend was when I was 12 years old. When we say we don't remember they think we are liars or trying to hide something. Even a normal person will forget things. But me, they detained me and tortured me, and you're going to see the evidence in my body, so of course I cannot give you every detail in my memory. Now if you ask me 14 years ago what I ate for lunch how am I going to know?”<sup>67</sup>

As a man who has lost hope for resettlement and the system itself, Ghasan is emboldened to articulate his frustrations outright. He is deeply troubled by the way the UNHCR has handled his case and feels wronged by the institution that is supposedly there to “help” him. He is particularly affected by the way the UNHCR operates under what he perceives as a lens of distrust towards him as it affects his own dignity and sanity. Those who said that they had lost hope, were more likely to explicitly articulate their feelings of resentment. On the other hand, out

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<sup>66</sup> Ghasan. Interview by author. July 1, 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Ghasan. Interview by author. July 1, 2017.

those interviewees still hopeful for resettlement, often mentioned their grievances, but did not explicitly voice their frustrations with agencies like the UNHCR and IOM. This emphasizes the interesting point of who is more likely to offer up a counter narrative directly. From this data it seems as though those who have lost hope, who feel as though they have nothing much else to lose, feel ironically more freed to voice their dissent. Many refugees share a sense of resentment against the West even as they tell me that their biggest hope is to resettle somewhere in the U.S., Canada, or countries in Europe. Furthermore, Maryam and many others like herself, when pressed about the source of the violence in their countries simply attribute “outside powers.” When asked specifically who these “outside powers” are, Maryam shrugs her head and smiles, a shy refusal to speak any more on the topic. Reading between the lines, however, it seems that even those less vocal about articulating their resentment are aware of the ways in which imperialist powers, particularly America, are implicated in the conflicts. However, they choose not to articulate this because they fear what the repercussions of such an outright condemnation could be, as their grievances are against the very system that they are trying to penetrate in order to gain access to rights. This points to how (often in subtle ways) the marginalized can recapture agency through careful subversion and controlled tactics of destabilizing master narratives. Note that these tools used by the marginalized cannot be romanticized as ultimately they are operating within the heavy control and power of the state. But they do point to the ways that people who appear to be simply “victims” operate under the system while finding discrete ways to resist.

In his book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, prominent political scientist, James C. Scott writes about the politics of reputation and explains how people who have much more to lose (the marginalized) often have their hands tied when it comes to

expressing their dissent.<sup>68</sup> Refugees like Maryam who are hopeful to be resettled feel the need to feign a lack of awareness about the situation on the ground even if they are fully aware of what powers have displaced them. They understand the value of being a “good refugee” in order for the UNHCR to recognize their status as a persecuted person and that their chance at resettlement is very much based on the receiving country’s assessment of how well they will make a “good” and obedient citizen. Resettlement and the prospect of citizenship to a country in the West brings tangible rewards that the marginalized individual recognizes.

On the other hand, Ghasan is less reticent to express his viewpoint and offer up a counter narrative. The counter narrative becomes a meaningful tool of empowerment as it destabilizes the master narrative and what it means to be a “good refugee.” Ghasan clearly indicates how his story is just as credible and deserving of refugee status while also challenging the notion that he is a passive victim with no sense of resistance. He refuses to keep his head down and keep quiet as he says, “If you want to film me, film me. I’m not just going to talk, I’m going to show you everything. All my reports, my wounds, everything...show it to the Americans.”<sup>69</sup> He is confident that his experiences do, in fact, entitle him to the protections afforded by refugee status and demands his family gets resettled simply for the sake of his children’s future. His anger is marked by a person who feels helpless in the face of injustice given that his case has been pending with no movement since 2013. The fact that even his story is just as deserving as refugee status and resettlement requires a questioning of the master narrative, as it does not encompass Ghasan’s case.

The refugee master narrative needs broadening in order to encompass those who do not succumb to its mere portrayal of victimhood. As a man who has been through unspeakable acts

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<sup>68</sup> Scott, 24

<sup>69</sup> Ghasan. Interview by author. July 1, 2017.

of torture and driven from his home country for fear of persecution, he is surely one who falls under the legal definition of a refugee. Moreover, his family's case is one that deserves both review for resettlement and additional support in Jordan. Ghasan points out that his wife, sick with failing kidneys, has yellow papery skin and can barely sit up. As a woman in her 40's she looks much older and can barely speak. He questions what more they need to suffer in order to be deserving of refugee status and resettlement? However, Ghasan refuses to hide his dissent and go through performative aspects of refugee status determination in order to fall within the master narrative and eventually gain access to rights.

For those who feign either lack of knowledge or hide their feelings of resentment, there is a very clear difference between "onstage" and "offstage" behavior.<sup>70</sup> This difference in behavior and vocal dissent based on setting are an exhibition of the unequal power dynamics which put refugees in a difficult position in which they must decide if they would like to hide their resentment in order to conform to the standards set forth to gain resettlement. Given the uncertain nature of their futures and the fact that time has become an oppressive force in their lives, they are left at the mercy of powerful institutions which will eventually decide their fates.

When describing the way marginalized perform acts of deference while still resisting the powers that be, James Scott was analyzing class conflicts and the way that the poor engage in everyday resistance rather than outright collective defiance.<sup>71</sup> In the same way, refugees resist power by acquiescing to the legal definition of a refugee as they play on narratives of victimhood in order to be recognized. However, the "offstage" attitudes that they portray show that they are unwilling to simply fall into the perfect mold of a victim in order to serve the interests of the West. My interview with Hassan is very indicative of the ways in which refugees engage in acts

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<sup>70</sup> Scott, 52

<sup>71</sup> Scott, 10

of resistance without necessarily staging outright rebellion, as they recognize that an outspoken condemnation of powerful institutions would be an extremely dangerous endeavor.

Hassan joins in mid-interview while I am speaking to an elderly gentleman, Nizar. When he walks in, Nizar explains that this is his friend Hassan and that he is to be interviewed next. He came over to this house because Hassan does not have a nice enough place for us to visit. I reassure him that I would just like to hear his story before Hassan sits down on a cushion on the floor to be interviewed next. Hassan is a skinny gentleman from Syria with tan, leathery skin. He has a bony face, torn pants, and looks to be about in his 40's. Hassan gives short answers to my first few questions and seems more reserved. He tells me how he has no troubles in his life, how he likes his community here in Jordan, and attributes the source of his displacement to "violence" without expanding further. After a few minutes, Nizar interrupts us. He tells Hassan to stop lying when he had complained to him about his water bill just yesterday and he insists that Hassan tell me about his daughter's condition. "Do not be afraid, she does not work for them," Nizar tells Hassan to try to reassure him. I gather here that because I had introduced myself as a student from America, Hassan perceives me to be working for some Western-affiliated foreign-aid agency that relies on "truth-seeking" policies in order to award support to its beneficiaries.

Rather than stage an outright confrontation Hassan chooses to hide his feelings of resentment as he feels as though he must appease outside powers in order to gain access to rights and resources. This false deference is indicative of the social imbalance of power as the less privileged are more likely to engage in this performative behavior to secure rights under the state and resources under foreign aid groups. However, in Hassan's case I sense not only shyness, but also a more palpable fear. His friends try to support him through the interview and only once I

remind him that I will not use his real name in the interview does he finally get comfortable and reveal to me that he is afraid of speaking. He says he fears saying anything not only against the U.S., but also against the Jordanian government. He does not know who belongs to the secret police<sup>72</sup> here and he fears that what he says might have him and his family deported back to Syria. He explains that he would like to resettle to the West someday. This difference between outward behavior and actual feelings is an interesting discrepancy that illuminates how refugees interact with organizations responsible for their asylum case and resettlement. The repercussions of not tempering one's interactions when it comes to humanitarian agencies are immense. Ghasan's wife later tells me that it is unlikely that anything will ever come out of their case as she says, "We went to get interviewed at the IOM office and my husband got angry. He started yelling and telling them that I was sick. He asked them why they were taking such a long time and told them to respect my case. Immediately they refused his case. It's gone."<sup>73</sup>

### ***Time as Oppression***

It is important to note the extent to which interviewees express their discontent and its correlation to a person's time spent in Jordan. Refugees who have been living in Jordan for longer periods of time and who have not seen any movement on their resettlement case for the past five years or more are both more disillusioned by the process and more emboldened to openly articulate their grievances with what they perceive as an imperialist system under the control of Western powers. Iraqis, therefore, are much more inclined to speak negatively about their experiences, their distrust in the resettlement process, and their lack of hope for a positive outcome for their children in the future. According to Jordanian border authorities, the highest

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<sup>72</sup> Many interviewees spoke about their fear of the secret police. The secret police are responsible for deporting refugees who are working illegally in Jordan.

<sup>73</sup> Thanaa. Interview by author. July 1, 2017.



movement of the Iraqi population into Jordan after the beginning of the 2003 invasion of Iraq occurred between 2004 and 2005.<sup>74</sup> In contrast, most Syrian refugees living in Jordan have been in the country for a much shorter period of time. The influx of Syrians only began after 2012 following the eruption of mass protests against President Bashar al-Assad. The interviews in this study corroborate the notion that time in one's first country of asylum is an important factor in a refugee person's level of hope, willingness to articulate their resentment, and ultimately levels of anxiety about their future.

Refugees awaiting resettlement perceive time to be a source of oppression in their lives in that it creates a sense of powerlessness over both their immediate daily reality and their imagined future. The indeterminacy of the resettlement process, which is entirely at the discretion of humanitarian organizations, is oppressive and contributes to an unequal power dynamic between each individual refugee and the humanitarian institution. Given the oppressive nature of time in their lives, it is not surprising that refugees who have been stuck in "limbo" in Jordan, especially Iraqi refugees, are less inclined to cling to hope and more outwardly willing to voice their resentment towards the institutions they feel they can no longer trust. These problems are further exacerbated by policy in Jordan that makes it illegal for refugees to work. It should be noted that there is one exception to this rule under the Jordan Compact. The Jordanian government partnered with the UNHCR in 2016 to begin a process of issuing work permits to Syrian refugees. Under this new policy, employers have a three-month grace period in which they can obtain work permits from the government to issue to Syrian refugees without charge.<sup>75</sup> This legal

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<sup>74</sup> "Iraqis in Jordan: Their Numbers and Characteristics." UNHCR. Last modified May 2007. <http://www.unhcr.org/47626a232.pdf>.

<sup>75</sup> "Work Permits and Employment of Syrian Refugees in Jordan: Towards Formalising the Work of Syrian Refugees." ReliefWeb. Accessed April 17, 2018. <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/work-permits-and-employment-syrian-refugees-jordan-towards-formalising-work-syrian>.

change was implemented to improve the economic condition of Syrian refugees in Jordan, but these measures have been marginally, if even at all, helpful. Moreover, many Syrian and Iraqi urban refugee children do not have access to the public education system in Jordan. Although technically Iraqi and Syrian refugee children are given free enrollment in the public schools, many of the schools have reached capacity and are unable to accommodate them. With the adults unemployed and the children unable to attend school, prospects for Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Jordan are slim and constantly in flux.

Given these limitations on their daily living situations, Iraqi and Syrian refugees tend to feel as though their time is full of “nothing” and this lack of “something to do” serves as a great source of anxiety for many of them. Many refugees articulate that they feel like they are living in a period of “unknown” and “empty” time as they wait to hear back from the UNHCR on their resettlement case. All of these contribute to a sense of anxiety and dissatisfaction with their current situation and their hope for a brighter future (either when they return to their home country or when they are resettled to another country) is often contingent upon how long they have spent in Jordan during this resettlement period. Altogether, the interviews support the conclusion that time is experienced in a more prolonged fashion which contributes to feelings of oppression and powerlessness over their predicament. Further, the idea of temporal uncertainty has been discussed in the context of refugee populations. In her study of Iraqi refugees displaced in Egypt, Nadia El-Sharawi argues that the temporary transit state in which this population finds itself during displacement negatively impacts their health and feelings of stability.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> El-Shaarawi, Nadia. “Living an Uncertain Future: Temporality, Uncertainty, and Well-Being among Iraqi Refugees in Egypt.” *Social Analysis*, vol. 59, no. 1, Jan. 2015, doi:10.3167/sa.2015.590103.

Many of the interviewees discussed how their time was devoid of any purposeful or meaningful activity and instead only filled with nothingness. To express this concept of empty time, some respondents elaborated on the kinds of meaningless activities they attempted to fill their day with. One of the interviewees, Mohammad, stated that “the ceiling of his apartment has 48 lines on it” and that he “counts them every day.” Another interviewee, Ali, stated that all he does is “sit in every corner of this room, and watch the walls.” For this individual and many others, months of waiting pass agonizingly long and the fact that no clear time period for the settlement case was set creates an almost tortuous state of waiting and uncertainty.

These statements reveal how lack of activity in daily routine because of the strict policies and restrictions on refugee living can contribute to discontent and anxiety. Moreover, they point to the fact that refugees cannot fill their day with meaningful activity, that they do not have control over their situation, and that they do not have a sense of how long this “waiting period.” These create an unequal power dynamic between the refugee and organizations like the UNHCR and the IOM who are in charge of resettlement cases. The manipulation of time is a great source of frustration and anxiety for refugees living in countries of asylum as time is passed in a much more extended way for the refugee communities whose lives have been put on pause because of their forced displacement. Refugees are left at the mercy of these organizations that often take months to make any advancements on their cases and their impersonal relationship with them creates a power imbalance in which time, and not just material and capital imbalances, becomes a source of oppression. Ghasan points to these imbalances in his frustrations over his predicament and uncertainty about his future.

*American Empire, Selective Human Rights, & the Implications of Resistance*

The difference between those who acquiesce or resist also point to how willing a person is to articulate what they perceive as “unfair” treatment. This idea of “unfairness” comes from a dissonance between what states portray as moral values of upholding human rights while simultaneously denying people the right to movement when they clearly demonstrate they are legally classified as refugees with need for resettlement. Further, the divisions of acquiescence versus resistance point to the curious ways in which American empire works to advance ideas of American exceptionalism while simultaneously functioning to divide, exploit, and control. In his book, *Barbarian Virtues*, historian Matthew Frye Jacobsen explains how imperialist policies of the U.S. have a long history of charged encounters with disparaged peoples. He critiques the dominant ideas of national destiny and “proper Americanism” that have informed the United States’ policies dealing with immigrants and foreign people starting all the way from the Philippine-American War to the “age of *Border Watch* and the Gulf War.”<sup>77</sup>

Thirty-two out of the forty refugees interviewed articulate their desire to resettle to the West. Shahed is a 22-year-old Iraqi woman and Ghasan’s eldest daughter. Shahed sits on a plastic chair throughout her father’s interview and frequently nods her head in agreement while her father speaks to me. After the interview with Ghasan, Shahed asks if she could be interviewed as well. She tells me about her happy days in Iraq when she was a child at school and compares them to her unhappiness here in Jordan where the neighbors look down on her because she is Iraqi. She says she feels bored at home and also has a lot of responsibility because she is the eldest and her family is under a lot of pressure because their futures are mired in uncertainty. When I ask her what she would like to tell the world about herself she responds:

“I would tell them I am 22 and that I do not think about myself. I think about my younger siblings. I hope to see them grow to old age. I want to tell them not to portray us unfairly. We are not barbarians...we are equal. Allah created us all on the same level... “Right now I see my

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<sup>77</sup> Jacobson, 14

future just to support and help my mother and father. But my wish is to go to America to study. My future will be good there. I've been dreaming of 6 years to go to America. Do you think that if I will go to the States that I will be doing bad things there? Going to the States is my dream so I will be good, I will hold my dream. I still wish and dream that I will go to America.”<sup>78</sup>

Like Shahed, many others articulate their dreams of going to America. When asked why they want to resettle to America rather than any other country, some would often mention America's emphasis on human rights and spoke about the importance of democracy and a free life. Ali is a 50-year-old man from Iraq. He wears a collared shirt and neatly ironed trousers. He explains that in Iraq he worked as a coordinator with human rights organizations. He says,

“I used to get visits from American troops and American generals who wanted to coordinate with me about the human rights situation in the country.” During his time helping the coalition forces he was shot in the head between the eyes. To this day he still does not know where the bullet came from. Ali brings out his X-rays of the bullet that is still lodged in his brain and laughs at the fact that he is perfectly fine today. He calls it nothing short of a miracle and continues laughing as he tells me, “I must be like a cat with 7 lives!” He is not optimistic about his hopes for resettlement as he accounts for me his experiences with the UNHCR. “I went to the UN and started yelling asking them where is my justice? I was a special case! I worked with the Americans! I think they took my case and threw it in the garbage.”<sup>79</sup>

When asked why he wanted to resettle to the United States, Ali responds with the following:

“They live a democratic life. They live a free life. They are educated people and they are going to support you. They will not try to hurt you. This is my opinion. They are educated and they have everything to allow them to live a good life. They have even animal rights! Imagine! They take care of animals so I'm sure they will take care of us!”<sup>80</sup>

(An interesting side note, 3 other interviewees independently mentioned that they had heard about America's animal rights record and were convinced that America would then surely be concerned about their human rights as well.)

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<sup>78</sup> Shahed. Interview by author. July 1, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Ali. Interview by author. July 12, 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Ali. Interview by author. July 12, 2017.

These interviewees suggest that many still believe in the “American dream” and champion America as a leader in human rights. However, stopping here would not provide the full context of how American empire works today and would only serve to promote the façade of American exceptionalism. To say that the U.S. is simply bad would be a huge oversimplification, however, counter stories from these refugees suggest that we need to reanalyze the propaganda that tries to frame the U.S. as uniquely good. In reality, empires often run on moral pretense in order to sustain protracted, military interference in other parts of the world. Presidents Bush Sr., Clinton, Bush Jr. Obama, and Trump have all boasted our country’s human rights legacy and have idealized the American image with the “shining city on a hill” portrayal.<sup>81</sup> This serves to convince the world that not only are we the most powerful, smartest, and the richest, but also the *most-deserving* because we operate on a moral high ground that no other nation compares with. However, facts and numbers tell a different story. For instance, according to an 18-month long investigation by the New York Times, the U.S. led war against ISIS kills 31 times more civilians than it claims. Reports Anand Gopal and Azmat Khan write, ““It is at such a distance from official claims that, in terms of civilian deaths, this may be the least transparent war in recent American history.”<sup>82</sup>

The facts demand a reevaluation of American stated interests of freedom, democracy, and liberty. Media, the American public, and to an extent the world has adopted the idea that America operates under these higher moral grounds and effectively allow the United States to act as a moral arbitrator of the world. This dichotomy between ideology and reality allows for the

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<sup>81</sup> Fournier, Ron. "Obama's New American Exceptionalism." The Atlantic. July 28, 2016. Accessed January 28, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/obamas-new-american-exceptionalism/493415/>.

<sup>82</sup> Ward, Alex. "Report: the US-led war against ISIS is killing 31 times more civilians than claimed." Vox. November 16, 2017. Accessed January 30, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/11/16/16666628/iraq-nyt-casualties-civilian>.

hypocrisy that pervades American empire today. We can torture prisoners in Guantanamo while simultaneously criticizing the human rights record of Saddam Hussein. Countries that engage in protracted violence need to project to the world these moral narratives in order to justify horrific crimes against humanity. If the state can convince the world that some moral good is being achieved than it can commit reprehensible actions on the wider stage with much less criticism and accountability.

In this way, human rights issues are often leveraged by the military and U.S. imperial interests to basically act as a lubricant for war. The call for the invasion of Iraq, for instance, was predicated on stopping a ruthless dictator from harming his own people and bringing democracy to the Middle East. In his speech to the American Enterprise Institute in 2003, former President George W. Bush says, ““The first to benefit from a free Iraq would be the Iraqi people themselves. Today they live in scarcity and fear, under a dictator who has brought them nothing but war, and misery, and torture. Their lives and their freedom matter little to Saddam Hussein--but Iraqi lives and freedom matter greatly to us.”<sup>83</sup> This selective attention to human rights abuses by the American government calls into question the true motives of our country’s governments. Counter stories from those who have been displaced by U.S. foreign interventions question whether the state is really motivated by human rights and democracy.

Nadia, a 54-year-old woman living in the affluent Rabia district of Amman explains what she believes is happening in her country, Iraq:

“The American army was training Iraqi people from both sides in Netherlands on how to make this Sunni and Shia divide. They train them, show them how to use the weapons, and assassinate them and give them names. You are Team A and they are team B. You wear your uniform and kill people on the opposite team. Make a divide, that’s it. They [terrorist groups in Iraq] are all just a bunch of thieves and criminals. They don’t really care about religion or anything like you hear...if they [Americans] cared so much about

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<sup>83</sup> National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed January 29, 2018. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030226-11.html>.

democracy why didn't they go to the other countries? Saudi, Morocco, anywhere else? Are they democracies? Egypt? Algeria?"<sup>84</sup>

Note to reader: Netherlands involvement in the Sunni and Shia divide is unclear as there is no factual evidence for this. There is ample evidence that U.S. coalition forces have trained Iraqi soldiers and that they have been supplying weapons to the Iraqi military. However, there is not specific mention of Netherlands, specifically. The notion that Nadia *believes* they were involved is important here. Nadia explains that the current violence in her country is an intentional product of foreign intervention and then goes on to explain what she believes is the true motivator for war in Iraq, which is oil. She also describes how her personal life and personal freedom as a woman has changed because of the war, in ways that contradict the notion that America is bringing liberty to previously oppressed people. She continues,

“There is no democracy. Even in America is there democracy?...Iraq is a land in the middle of an ocean of oil. That's why they want Iraq. We are floating on oil. The last drop of oil will come from Iraq. The current government is all just thieves now. They take all the money back to their personal accounts...Did America ever attack Iran? All this weapons of mass destruction? All media! The facts are always different. All the refugees here who want to go to the U.S. they all just see the movies. They think it's the land of dreams. They see an American with a car, and a house, and everything on T.V. Are you like the movies? Can you snap your fingers and get money in your hands? The American dream, what is this? *Nadia begins laughing.* All media! He [President Trump] is ruling as a general manager of company named America! He's trying to make contracts for American companies. He's not a president! Since Bush's father, no Reagan, it's the worst. All of them are terrible. It's just that no one knows. Since Reagan the plan has started—to destroy Arab countries and put their hands on everything. Iraq was so different before. We used to go to nightclubs and wear shorts. Nothing you would see anymore. We have become extremists because of the war.”<sup>85</sup>

Nadia points to the long history of foreign intervention that dates back to the Reagan years (and arguably even before) and explains how the problem is much more systemic and problematic of the way the U.S. military-industrial complex operates. It is worth noting here how

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<sup>84</sup> Nadia. Interview by author. July 14, 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Nadia. Interview by author. July 14, 2017.



Nadia also mentions the way the American capitalistic image is sold to the rest of the world. That dominant image of making it from rags to riches in the American empire drives the thoughts of many refugees whose dream it is to resettle to the United States. The U.S. has essentially done a marvelous job of selling its façade to the world. For those like Amal who believe in their dream of coming to the U.S., but have seen no development on their cases with the UNHCR, this rejection comes at a very painful price. Amal explains how she feels now in Jordan with little hope for the future, “I feel disappointed, there is no point. For that I do not talk to anyone. I just see everything like a blur.”<sup>86</sup>

Here we see Amal, an Iraqi woman with two children who has not only had to deal with the pains of being forcibly displaced, but also of coming to the crushing realization that what she perceives as the “American dream” is unattainable for her and her family. Others still cling to the hope of resettlement, even when admitting that prospects are slim and that the U.S. is likely not as dream-like as others believe it to be. Ayesha is a Syrian woman with four children living in Hashemi Shamali, a district in East Amman where large populations of Syrian and Iraqi refugees live. As I conduct the interview, her youngest daughter who is about 5-year old sits in my lap. Ayesha explains that the political climate in the U.S. makes her think that they do not want her “type of people” there. She says that they were all “broken” when they heard about the “Muslim Ban,” but that she would still choose to resettle to the United States.<sup>87</sup> “I need a homeland. I have dreams for myself and my family. There is nothing here. My husband does not work. My son does not work. Each of us has a dream. And the general dream is to go to the United States. My brother is in New Jersey. We don’t care about the political climate there. There is life there.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Amal. Interview by author. July 2, 2017.

<sup>87</sup> Ayesha, Interview by author. July 16, 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Ayesha. Interview by author. July 16, 2017.

Despite her wishes, given her long waiting times and lack of response from the UNHCR, she realizes that her resettlement case is unlikely to go through. “To be reasonable, what I am seeing here is that I will never get to the U.S. We have been four years without one interview.”<sup>89</sup>

For Ayesha and many others, seeking resettlement is most important simply to secure a brighter future for their children. Despite acknowledging the hypocrisy in American empire, they continue to look to the U.S. as a land of opportunity. With war-torn home countries and low prospects for a stable life in Jordan, these refugees look Westward for the slimmest chance of securing a better life for their children. A few others who acknowledge the U.S. dichotomy between support for human rights and action that goes contrary to their ethical standards, do not believe they will be able to find a home in the U.S. Mona, a teacher who studied religious law back in Syria, voices these sentiments best:

“We humans need peace. The injuries can heal, but just help us get rid of the strangers from the country. You can change everything. You are the superpowers. You have the strength. Regardless of what religion you are if someone tries to rape your daughter you are going to defend yourself and them. This is what is happening to us. Let us live in peace. Help us live in peace. I think that majority of people in the West, they have the humanity. They believe we are victims and think we have nothing to do with the violence. But of course there are others who doubt us and doubt if we are the ones suffering. The people in charge, like the governments, they don’t care about us. The governments are selfish and put the rules for their own benefit. The prime ministers and presidents, when we listen to their speeches, we realize that they are smart. They know everything.”<sup>90</sup>

Mona speaks these words as her husband sits in one corner of the room, trembling with his knees folded in towards his chest and his head hung low. Mona explains that the Syrian army abducted and tortured him, and ever since he has never been the same. She asks what kind of world we live in that allows this to happen. Unlike others who claim that governments do not understand what is happening, Mona says, that “they know everything.” This assertion that the

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<sup>89</sup> Ayesha. Interview by author. July 16, 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Mona. Interview by author. July 19, 2017.

U.S. government knows has significant implications. Too often we see the casualties of U.S. foreign policies framed as nothing more than “collateral damage,” as an unfortunate mistake, as former President Obama says in his interview with the Atlantic.<sup>91</sup> However, Mona’s words suggest that imperial, military policies that hurt civilians are not simply bumbling mistakes as they are so often framed to be. Interestingly, the “collateral damage” rhetoric is reserved for the victims of the U.S. government, while casualties caused by the enemies of the U.S. are referred to as those who have been killed or murdered.

Despite this knowledge Mona still hopes to resettle to the West. She closes her interview with these words, “I do not like America to be frank. I do not think I would fit in the culture. But for the future of my kids, I want to go there. My kids can make a future there. That’s all I want. We need to believe in our hopes and in the future. Hopefully one day Syria will become better and I can go back to teaching my students in Syria. Because of what has happened to us we are scared of everything, but we still have the hope.”<sup>92</sup>

Finally, I would like to close this chapter with a moving excerpt from one of my last interviews in Amman. Mohammed lives on the fourth floor of a building in Hashemi Shamali. He has several kids who walk in and out of the room as he is interviewed. After waiting many years for assistance, he feels disillusioned by his situation here in Jordan and approaches foreign aid through a cynical eye. He tells me:

“They know what happened and they don’t want to fix it because that was their plan. If you want to support us and help us don’t give us food stamps or help us. Try to fix the situation in Syria so that we can go back. We will sustain ourselves and we will take care of ourselves. The people of American have the right to petition and stand up against their government. If they have the democracy they talk about the people have to fight for it. At

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<sup>91</sup> Friedersdorf, Conor. "Obamas Weak Defense of His Record on Drone Killings." The Atlantic. December 23, 2016. Accessed January 30, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/president-obamas-weak-defense-of-his-record-on-drone-strikes/511454/>.

<sup>92</sup> Mona. Interview by author. July 19, 2017.

the end of the day I don't believe the Americans have the democracy they have to talk to their governments and support us Syrians. The world has watched Syria become destroyed. It will not be the same for at least another 100 years...the United Nations did not support me and they know all that I am suffering. I am hungry and do not have clothes. You think you will be able to support me? With all my respect, you cannot do anything. It's good to know our stories, but at the end of the day I don't think anyone is going to support us. If they really want to support us then get rid of Bashar and help us rebuild our country."

### Chapter 3

#### Human Rights Weaponized—An Instrument of the State

On May 8, 2017, Arizona Senator John McCain published an op-ed titled “Why We Must Support Human Rights.” He published this piece to decry the lack of concern for human rights in President Trump’s administration. In his op-ed he writes, “We are a country with a conscience. We have long believed moral concerns must be an essential part of our foreign policy, not a departure from it. We are the chief architect and defender of an international order governed by rules derived from our political and economic values.”<sup>93</sup> John McCain’s supposedly resolute stand against the Trump administration’s deviance from human rights standards was lauded with bipartisan support. Even the head of Human Rights Watch was so touched by McCain’s words that he shared the op-ed himself in support of Senator’s McCain’s moral stance. McCain had voiced his concerns about the current administration’s departure from the American moral standard on many occasions since President Trump’s inauguration and frequently urged the President to make human rights discourse a priority in his policy decisions and discussions with world leaders. Furthermore, on July 28, 2017, the *Washington Post* published an article titled “Why human rights defenders love John McCain.”<sup>94</sup> It seemed as though Senator McCain had become the new defender of human rights at a time when integrity and morality in politics had

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<sup>93</sup> McCain, John. "John McCain: Why We Must Support Human Rights." *The New York Times*. Last modified May 8, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/08/opinion/john-mccain-rex-tillerson-human-rights.html>.

<sup>94</sup> Orucoglu, Berivan. "Why human rights defenders love John McCain." *The Washington Post*. Last modified July 28, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/07/28/why-human-rights-defenders-love-john-mccain/?utm\\_term=.b4b0b7f7b327](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/07/28/why-human-rights-defenders-love-john-mccain/?utm_term=.b4b0b7f7b327).

been thrown out the window. After all, McCain was a man who represented what all Americans would agree was the best of our country; he was a man of “duty, honor, and country.”<sup>95</sup>

To all those whose memories had not failed them, McCain’s words were curious, to say the least. McCain, the same man who notoriously sang “Bomb, bomb, bomb, Iran” was now calling out President Trump on his lack of concern over human rights.<sup>96</sup> Let us not forget that Senator McCain has also been one of the most vocal supporters of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Did McCain all of a sudden have a change of heart after President Trump’s election? Perhaps not considering in April of 2017, Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham worked together to push President Trump to increase military intervention in Syria.<sup>97</sup> This inconsistency calls to question Senator McCain’s true motivations when using human rights rhetoric. McCain seems to support intervention in Syria through a human rights lens. He argues that we must intervene in order to save the people of Syria from the human rights abuses of President Assad. However, does McCain not consider invasion of another country, one of the most heinous war crimes of all, a human rights abuse? How can one stand to advocate for unprovoked, violent military intervention while simultaneously acting as a voice of moral authority over human rights concerns?

Digging a little deeper we see how Senator McCain often uses human rights terminology to call out his political opponents. In many of his “human rights” pieces he draws on American

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<sup>95</sup> Golshan, Tara. "John McCain is escalating his longstanding feud with President Donald Trump." Vox. Last modified October 24, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/10/24/16522948/mccain-trump-feud-explained>.

<sup>96</sup> Gonyea, Don. "Jesting, McCain Sings: 'Bomb, Bomb, Bomb' Iran." National Public Radio. Last modified April 20, 2007. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9688222>.

<sup>97</sup> Carney, Jordain. "McCain, Graham push Trump for 'greater military action' in Syria." The Hill. Last modified April 4, 2017. <http://thehill.com/blogs/floor-action/senate/328401-mccain-graham-push-trump-for-greater-military-action-in-syria>.

historical precedent and cites former president Ronald Reagan as the true embodiment of American values. He plays on the notion of America as the strongest defender of freedom and doggedly supports America's mission of spreading democracy to the world. Under such analysis, McCain's selective human rights concerns are much less confusing. Clearly, this vacillation between violence and nonviolence, morality versus immorality, points to the ways in which human rights discourses are merely used as a pretense for more reprehensible missions of centralizing power and strengthening the American empire.

This inconsistency with regards to human rights is by no means a partisan issue. Samantha Power, former United States Ambassador to the United Nations, the Founding Executive Director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, AND Pulitzer Prize winning author for her book on U.S. human rights abuses, demonstrates the hypocrisy of American empire.<sup>98</sup> In late 2016, Power asked representatives from Russia, Iran, and Syria at the UN assembly, "Is there no act of barbarism against civilians, no execution of a child that gets under your skin, that just creeps you out a little bit?"<sup>99</sup> Ironically, Ambassador Power was silent when thousands of Palestinian civilians were massacred in Gaza. She was not only silent, but also an advocate for Saudi Arabia's (and U.S.-backed) invasion of Yemen. Unfortunately, Yemenis are paying the price with a deadly civil war, an increase in child malnutrition of 200% since 2014, and the deadliest cholera outbreak in history.<sup>100</sup> Even worse,

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<sup>98</sup> Munro, Andre. "Samantha Power: American Journalist and Government Official." Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samantha-Power>.

<sup>99</sup> The Independent. Last modified December 15, 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/samantha-power-un-us-ambassador-america-syria-aleppo-massacres-srebrenica-rwandan-genocide-bizarre-a7476556.html>.

<sup>100</sup> "Malnutrition amongst children in Yemen at an all-time high, warns UNICEF [EN/AR]." Relief Web. Last modified December 12, 2016. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/malnutrition-amongst-children-yemen-all-time-high-warns-unicef-enar>.

these tragic consequences of war, inequity, and access are not acknowledged by the powers that only pay selective attention to human rights abuses. This arbitrary and selective moral posturing extends to the process of refugee resettlement as well. Lack of consistency in human rights is reflected in the random process of refugee status determination and resettlement (if that status is indeed granted). If human rights are purely a pretense, then it comes as no surprise that there is very little consistency in governments' handling of resettlement cases. The way shaky human rights manifest is most pronounced in refugee articulations of an unjust and inequitable system of resettlement.

In this chapter I shall draw directly from interviews with Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Jordan to highlight the ways in which humanitarian rhetoric is used to simply justify further oppression and marginalization. The experiences of those awaiting resettlement is marked by economic and social hardship while trying to integrate in Jordan as well as uncertainty about future support and mobility. Unresponsiveness and lack of support from Western affiliated humanitarian organizations often compounds these problems. These interviews further reveal how a universal understanding of humanitarian organizations as forces of "good" do more damage to conceal power imbalances in which refugee lives are left at the sole discretion of an unresponsive, bureaucratic agency like the UNHCR. It is also important to acknowledge that these injustices are not simply an unavoidable aspect of humanitarian work. They are neither inevitable nor natural consequences of refugee resettlement. Rather, they are maneuvers used to control power in that state and exploit those who do not fit into the system. Human rights have been utilized by the state since their very conception and countless scholars have critiqued these human rights discourses from the very start. That is to say, these histories of imperial powers abusing the powerless while simultaneously using human rights terminology are not new. This



research simply aims to put refugee resettlement in conversation with these abuses of power. As evident from interviews with Syrian and Iraqi refugees waiting resettlement, problems with humanitarian organizations, whether intentional or not, are weaponized by the state to justify wars and continue to subjugate those fleeing from that violence. Furthermore, these articulations from refugees themselves seek to combat the colonial arrogance that their subjects are unknowing and oblivious victims of the system.

### ***Vocal Dissent from Refugees and an Analysis of Charity versus Solidarity***

I walk into a home in Hashemi Shamali through an asymmetric doorway and sit down in the living room of a tiny and dimly lit apartment. The walls are streaked with black marks and a distinct smell of overripe fruit wafts in from the kitchen. Two couches are pushed up against each other leaving little space to walk. A middle-aged man with very dark hair and much paler skin ushers me in and gestures for me to take a seat on one of the couches. He holds himself up on one crutch and he explains later that he is half-paralyzed due to a war injury. He introduces himself as Amar and then has me shake hands with his sister, Amal. Amal wears a black abaya and hijab and gives me a hug and several kisses on the cheek before settling down on the couch next to me. She has the same smile as her brother. A much older and frail woman, their mother, sits on the other couch. I feel uncomfortable as Amal insists that she helps her up to say hello to me. I quickly give her mother a kiss on each cheek and the elderly woman immediately sits back down. The woman introduces herself as Duha and tells me that she is 89 years old. Before the interview begins she explains that she cannot hear properly so she asks that I speak loudly. Amar pulls up a plastic chair and sits next to his mother during the interview.

Duha speaks about her home in Syria and her life as a married woman. She talks about the joy her children bring to her life and the way Syria was a safe place for everyone before the

war. She then changes her tone when she talks about all the suffering she has witnessed and explains why her family moved to Jordan in 2013 to possibly find safety. She then goes on to explain that their family's struggles were not over even when they were technically away from the danger. She explains that Jordan is very hard on them as their salaries and supplies have been cut. When I ask how she likes her community here in Jordan, her son, Amar, interjects:

“I feel sorry for myself. All my friends are married and have children. I am stuck here like this. Do you know what happened to us last year? The UN told us last winter that we had to pack up in 3 days. We were going to leave and go to Canada! We packed our bags, made sure they were under 30 kilos, and gave away everything. And then we were told there was a mistake. That we were not going to go. We were shocked and we did not know what to do. They told us they didn't know when we were going to leave. So everything was over. I spent months trying to recollect things in our home because we got rid of everything. Finally, I went to the embassy and asked them what happened. They just said that our family was above the limit and that my file did not go through. I told them well at least respect me and tell me what happened! You cannot just leave me in the dark about our entire future.”<sup>101</sup>

Amar's family had come to Jordan with the sole intention of leaving the country once they could find a stable home elsewhere. After years of waiting by the phone during which the UNHCR would only contact them every few months to tell them that there were no new developments on their case, they were finally told that they would be able to move. They could start their lives over again in Canada, away from the dangers in Syria and away from the stifling community in Jordan where their lives had been put on pause. Getting that call from the UNHCR was what Amal describes as a “chance at life.” These high hopes are what makes the UNHCR's decision to suddenly halt their immigration to Canada even more devastating. Here Amar makes clear how disillusioned he is by the system that has wronged him and his family. He articulates how this injustice has affected himself and his own psychological wellbeing. Furthermore, he goes on to blame this injustice on the hypocritical nature of politicians supposedly reaching out

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<sup>101</sup> Duha. Interview by author. July 17, 2017.

to their communities while simultaneously neglecting him and his family. Historian, Jessica Namakkal writes, “The contradiction inherent in a system that allows states to decide who can cross specific borders within a world that frames the freedom to move as a human rights issue is often clear to the people trapped in airport immigration and customs cells and being held in container detention facilities along the borders of Europe.”<sup>102</sup> Amar, like countless other refugees, is facing the consequences of this exact contradiction. He finds it hard to believe that these governments are primarily motivated by humanitarian concerns. He directly calls out Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, as he goes on:

“Right now the case is still being processed. When we went to the Canadian embassy and we talked to the man. We told him if you are looking at humanity, our case deserves to go through. My brother cannot walk, my mother is old and in a wheelchair, I am sick. Have the respect! Have the humanity! We are people! We see those pictures of Justin going and welcoming people at the airport. But what about us? The Canadian embassy sucks. I went and asked to talk to anyone in charge. They sent me some guy in a military uniform. He said he was head of the security here. I told him I was a Syrian and that I needed to leave. I told him to ask what is going on. He told me to go the headquarters of the UN in Khalda and look for my name and case number. I asked him if he was sure before I left because I can barely walk and it would cost me money in the taxi. He said yes so I went to the UN and when I told them about my case they said this was bullshit. There was no case number and that I could not check my status. They said who the hell are you. You’re a Syrian and have no right to ask about the status of your case. I was so shocked. I couldn’t believe they lied to me. And they dismissed me just like that.”<sup>103</sup>

Amar recognizes a disjunction between what he sees coming from the West in the form of Justin Trudeau’s welcoming Syrian refugees at the airport and his own experience as a refugee awaiting resettlement. Although it may sound unreasonable to pin the source all of this suffering to one man, Justin Trudeau, Amar’s resentment points to the way in which symbolic humanitarianism can do a lot of damage. Rhetoric around human rights is often manipulated by world leaders to simply endorse more violence and abuse of power.

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<sup>102</sup> Namakkal, 5.

<sup>103</sup> Duha. Interview by author. July 17, 2017.

Reflecting on his experience with the Canadian embassy, Amar explains that he sees no solidarity and justice. He refuses to be seen as a charity case as he mentions that he is very capable and intelligent. He is offended by those who do not listen to his story and cast him off as useless. He tells me that he used to be an inventor and had his machine patented. Amar tells me his life back in Syria was “amazing” and that he would have never “knocked on your [our] door.” He tells me what he wanted to tell the Canadian embassy when they refused to give him any updates to his case:

“I will tell them [the Canadian embassy] that you are not God. Your country is not a heaven... You guys are talking about humanity. But if you believe in it you will take me on the first plane to Canada. You guys are selfish. You only take the ones who will support you, who are healthy, and well-educated. You take those who will make you look good. But this is not humanity. I thought before that humanity was to take care of people in our condition, not just the qualified people so that you can take them and use them.”<sup>104</sup>

This distinction between charity and solidarity that Amar discusses is an important one. Often nations prioritize humanitarian work through a lens of “charity” which allows the practice of human rights to be arbitrary and selective. Solidarity, on the other hand, would require unwavering support for the community that one is standing in solidarity with. Nations with agendas that do not prioritize human rights, therefore, adopt their good work strategy under a general agreement of supporting human rights when it bolsters public image. With public image of empire building as the primary concern, charity then becomes a temporary hand-out that can be withdrawn at any time. There is no acknowledgment of the role of justice in these matters, and instead the praise goes to the ever noble and altruistic state.

Charity with neglect of justice or solidarity also serves the purpose of “othering.” Charity operates on the assumption that the giver is above and the receiver is below. There is some value

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<sup>104</sup> Duha. Interview by author. July 17, 2017.

in recognizing the power dynamic in any relationship. Charity does bring into focus the privileges of one person over another, but too often this analysis of privilege is swept under the rug. That is to say, the generosity of the giver is highlighted while the structural imbalance that has put one in a position of power and another in a position of subjugation is overlooked. Amar directly speaks about this unequal power dynamic as he tells us that those in the West are not “God.” He acknowledges that the West is neither inherently better nor on a higher moral ground. He takes pride in himself and his people and says that if not for the violence he would have liked to go back to Syria. He mentions that his life in Syria was “amazing.” This challenges the American (and often Western) attitude of exceptionalism that insinuates that we alone live on some “shining city on a hill.” Rather, Amar sees opportunity and stability in the West in the form of resources. The West is not some inherently better land filled with goodness, but a land of resources in a world where imperialism and extraction has distributed goods and capital in a deeply inequitable way.

Amar is also offended by charity and the way it places judgments about his community as “incompetent” or “incapable.” The “othering” effect of charity also has shady consequences. The “othering” phenomenon is a process beneficial to the state as it weakens one’s empathy and ability to understand those outside of his or her own situation. In other words, if one cannot relate to an individual who is subjugated, then that person becomes removed to the situation to such an extent that they believe there is no possibility that they could be the next target of an oppressive state. The privileged become complacent and are convinced that they will not be “next” because they cannot identify with those being oppressed. In this way, solidarity is pushed under the rug as long as those benefiting from the system are removed from the situation and do not feel compelled to resist.

The “othering” process bring to light the way “refugee” has become a cultural term today. Moreover, many capitalize on the displacement phenomenon as politicians use this conflation to garner sympathy votes. However, certain depictions of refugee are valorized over others, as “refugee” as a cultural term does a poor job of incorporating all people who have been displaced--those who support the system AND those against it who try to destabilize the imperialist narrative of refugees as victims. Instead, states tend to focus on imagery of the deserving poor, often neglecting systemic power imbalances that render people as marginalized and oppressed in the first place. This is seen in the way victimhood often gains more support than other stories and explains the curious lack of support for men like Ghasan. Human rights advocates and state officials who are the supposed champion of human rights neglect certain forms of refugeehood which ties in to imperialist policy’s campaign of adopting human rights agendas when it is convenient.

At the end of the day, poor countries need justice, not charity. Furthermore, the aid narrative becomes naïve as it masks the maldistribution of resources. These interviews reveal that there is an unequal power dynamic at play in the resettlement process and that the histories of colonialism and imperialism are ongoing. Interviewee, Maher from Syria, acknowledges this:

“They [the U.S.] don’t want the people to be equal so they try to make a gap between us. We are Arabs and we have our civilization and culture. The West took so much of our culture, our medicine, our math...I’m not going to say all Arabs are good because that is just not the truth. They [the West] need to know that as people at the end of the day we respect others and we want peace. That’s it. I also wanted to add, if I liked to fight and I loved violence why would I leave Syria? We are not terrorists. We want peace. Tell the West that. We are Arabs and we are not stupid. We are kind and thankful people who have a good heart. We have dignity. I heard Trump say that Saudi Arabia, the country, was like a cow. You cannot milk us then kill us to use the meat. We are not cows. That is all I have to say.”<sup>105</sup>

### *A Blind Eye to State-Sanctioned Violence*

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<sup>105</sup> Maher. Interview by author. July 17, 2017.

Most of the refugees interviewed felt very much forgotten and neglected by organizations like the UNHCR and IOM who were working on their cases. With no updates on their cases and no support even in the form of humanitarian assistance, many felt their suffering in Jordan was being overlooked despite all the media attention given to the “refugee problem.” Of the 40 interviews, 28 interviewees stated that they did not get any or enough support from the UNHCR. Many of these interviewees described how humanitarian assistance in the form of tangible support fell drastically below their needs. Moreover, their inability to legally work in Jordan compounded the financial pressures of securing food, shelter, electricity, water, and healthcare treatment in an unknown land. This neglect by state actors and international agencies highlights the ways in which violence against a group and the subsequent marginalization against them is almost deliberately overlooked. One of the most troubling interviews I had was one of the very last interviews I conducted with a Syrian man in Hashemi Shamali who talked about the neglect he faced despite his situation. In this interview, I had to reflect heavily on my own identity as an American and consider the ethics of being a student researching issues of forced displacement.

We climb about 4 flights of stairs before getting to the apartment. Immediately upon entrance we are bombarded by about six or seven kids. They range in age from about 2 to 9 and are curious to observe the foreigner who has entered their home. Some are eating a packaged pastry snack dropping trails of crumbs around the home while others are playing around with each other. I catch a quick glance of three women in the kitchen who step away as soon as they see I am with Ammar and Abu Rakan. I go over to them privately and kiss each of them on the cheek. Shortly after a young looking man in track pants and a shirt leads me into the living room. The women remain in the kitchen. We sit on cushions on the floor. Besides the cushions the only other thing in the room is a fan. As soon as we are settled the man introduced himself as Hassan

then jumps up to grab tea from one of the women in the kitchen. He hands me a cup of super sweet *shai* in a small glass. I begin the interview, as always, describing who I am and my research. Kids walk in and out of the room as we conduct the interview and one of the little toddlers who wears a pair of eye glasses with a cord strapped around her head and two pigtailed sits on my lap throughout the interview. Hassan speaks very animatedly, uses large hand gestures, and sits at the edge of the cushion with his legs crossed in front of him. He speaks with a sense of urgency and look at me imploringly as he says:

“If people want to know the truth let them come here and see what we are suffering. I have had many students visit me. I always ask them at the end what they are going to provide for me. What are you going to do? You are going to get a high score from your college then throw your paper in the trash. I will be the same. I want you to tell everyone our real story. If you search on the internet you will see all of the suffering. But you come here to seek the truth by yourself so you need to go back and tell everyone what is happening. I will tell you this. The United Nations did not support me and they know all that I am suffering. I am hungry and do not have clothes. You think you will be able to support me? With all my respect, you cannot do anything. It’s good to know our stories, but at the end of the day I don’t think anyone is going to support us. If they really want to support us then get rid of Bashar and help us rebuild our country.”<sup>106</sup>

This interview was troubling because it revealed just how much issues associated with displacement are part of structural inequality. Hassan found these issues insurmountable and hearing his story gave me a better sense of why he felt so hopeless. Moreover, although I began the interview explaining that I was simply a student and would not be able to provide any tangible support to him and his family, he seemed to associate me with some kind of humanitarian assistance agency coming from the West. Respectfully, he forced me to challenge my role as a researcher. His pessimism with regards to my ability to actually do anything, even though accurate, also point to his previous experiences with humanitarian assistance agencies that have denied him any sort of benefits in the past. He does not think that anyone is going to

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<sup>106</sup> Hassan. Interview by author. July 30, 2017.



support him because in the past, state actors and agencies like the UNHCR have failed him. He describes exactly what this is like:

“We had nothing except our clothes when we decided to come here. We came to Zaatari<sup>107</sup> and spent 6 months there. We waited to get our protection card and food stamps and then we came here to Amman. The UN has not supported us enough. We are suffering here. Maybe they support others but they do not support us. I have my wife and 4 kids and they have cut their support for us. They give us 60 JD a month and it’s not enough to feed us. I have 6 mouths to feed. I tried working but the secret police caught me. They warned me but if they catch me again they will take me to the border. I am stuck.”<sup>108</sup>

He speaks more specifically about this lack of support and how it affects his life in Jordan. His current situation has left him with little hope for the future of his children:

“Here life is 1000 times more difficult. There is no support. What are we supposed to do? We cannot eat and we cannot work to even try to feed ourselves. The Jordanian government is not bad but we are still struggling. We need support. Here I took my children to the school and they told me bring the mother so that she could take them home so the kids stay with her here. We cannot take care of them. I want to support my children. I just need the UN to support me so I can support them. I want the best for them. And the Jordanian government is not bad but they cannot do everything for us. It is difficult for them. We need help from the UN. If they are not going to support us to help us support our children, then my kids will have no future. They will work with no education. The UN will not help me support my kids with education. They don’t support me with food, you think they will support me with their education?”<sup>109</sup>

Hassan then goes on to explain that these problems are part of something larger. He feels particularly hopeless because he thinks state actors in the West are aware of these issues. In fact, he seems to suggest that their suffering is part of a deliberate ploy.

“I think they [the U.S.] know what is going on. I think at least the governments know. They are the ones who planned to ruin Syria. They know what happened and don’t want to fix it because that was their plan. If you want to support us and help us don’t give us food stamps or help us. Try to fix the situation in Syria so that we can go back. We will sustain ourselves and we will take care of ourselves. The people of America have the right to petition and stand up against the government, right? If they have the democracy they talk about the people have to fight for it. At the end of the day I don’t believe the Americans have the democracy they seem to have to talk with their governments and

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<sup>107</sup> Zaatari is a refugee camp in northern Jordan

<sup>108</sup> Hassan. Interview by author. July 30, 2017.

<sup>109</sup> Hassan. Interview by author. July 30, 2017.

support us Syrians. The world has watched Syria become destroyed. It will not be the same for at least another 100 years.”<sup>110</sup>

Hassan’s last words in the interview heighten the gravity of the situation. His dwindling hope in light of his diminishing prospects in the future created a heavy and troubling atmosphere:

“I’m not going to tell anything else. I will keep it inside my heart. There is a God and there is justice. If you do not support me now, then God will judge you. There will be justice in the end. If you want to heal my suffering, then support me. Tell them to support me. No words are going to heal me. I need support.”<sup>111</sup>

Hassan’s story begs the question of when and where states choose to turn a blind eye to human suffering. 28 of the 40 interviewees stated that they felt neglected by either humanitarian agencies or the state. For these people, the UNHCR was offering them either too little or no support at all. Their resettlement cases were up in the air and updates on their status were not given. Refugees, as legally defined, are people who have escaped violence from their home state. Out of the line of immediate danger, they require support in their country of asylum. A state that denies them this support is turning a blind eye to not only their suffering, but also the violence that has driven them out of their homeland. This neglect at first seems hypocritical, but analyzing the trends of when states choose to condone (or even support) violence speaks volumes about the agenda of the state.

Here I will return to Ghasan’s story from Chapter 2. He was tortured by the American military while in prison. He speaks about unspeakable violence in which they broke his bones, electrocuted him, and used drills on his body.<sup>112</sup> This violence against Ghasan’s body was allowed to go unquestioned because the perpetrator was a state actor. America, has both signed

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<sup>110</sup> Hassan. Interview by author. July 30, 2017.

<sup>111</sup> Hassan. Interview by author. July 30, 2017.

<sup>112</sup> Ghasan. Interview by author. July 1, 2017.

and ratified the Geneva Conventions in which states agree that torture is illegal.<sup>113</sup> Yet, the U.S. state continues to participate in such heinous crimes against civilians, most notoriously at the U.S. military prison, Guantanamo Bay, in Cuba.<sup>114</sup> Former President George W. Bush, argued that the Geneva Conventions did not apply here because the military prison was not technically on American *soil*.<sup>115</sup> Human rights advocates from around the world, concerned about clear violations of the Conventions, applied pressure to the U.S. administration. In response, President George W. Bush stated that those held in Guantanamo were not “prisoners of war” but rather “unlawful combatants.”<sup>116</sup> “Unlawful combatants” do not have the same protections under the Geneva Conventions and the torture went (and still goes) on. The issue of morality here became nothing more than a question of semantics on the part of the state.

Therefore, when states begin to use international human rights rhetoric, those subject to the violence find it difficult to take their speech at more than face value. Interviews with refugees display that many refugees themselves, like Hassan, are left unconvinced by this sort of language because experience tells them otherwise. The state may choose to help them or it may not. Their access to aid and support is very much dependent on how human rights is framed. Moreover, violence and injustice goes unquestioned when a state actor commits the crime or when it supports the agenda of the state system. This negligence and selective human rights have massive implications for the way people view the world. Governments can essentially create simple binaries in which people are labeled as either enemies or friends. Depending on these

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<sup>113</sup> Farrell, Patrick. "What Is the Geneva Convention?" History News Network. Accessed March 20, 2018. <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/586>.

<sup>114</sup> Northam, Jackie. "Q&A About Guantanamo Bay and the Detainees." NPR. June 23, 2005. Accessed March 20, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4715916>.

<sup>115</sup> "Guantanamo Bay Naval Station Fast Facts." CNN. February 01, 2018. Accessed March 20, 2018. <https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/09/world/guantanamo-bay-naval-station-fast-facts/index.html>.

<sup>116</sup> Farrell, Patrick. "What Is the Geneva Convention?" History News Network. Accessed March 20, 2018. <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/586>.

labels, the state can commit unjustifiable actions without question or protest from the general public. The way the U.S. state uses its control of perceptions to shape foreign policy that continues injustice is depicted in the way the West chooses to valorize Malala Yousafzai, but ignore Ahd Tamimi.

In December of 2017, the 16-year-old Palestinian activist Ahd Tamimi was arrested in her village, Nabih Salih, in the West Bank. Ahd belongs to a second generation of Palestinians who have grown up on occupied land. Ahd and her family were protesting the expansion of Israeli settlements around her village when an IDF soldier shot her younger, 15-year-old cousin in the head with a rubber-coated steel bullet. Her cousin sustained serious injuries and was put in a medically induced coma before finally recovering consciousness after a few days. In an encounter with the IDF soldier that shot her cousin, Ahd is filmed “clapping, kicking, and shoving” him and a group of armed soldiers.<sup>117</sup> Tamimi was arrested and is on trial in Israeli military court, where Palestinians are convicted at a rate higher than 99%.<sup>118</sup> Ahd, when responding to why she confronted the officers stated, “I saw the same soldiers who hit my cousin, this time in front of my house. I could not keep quiet and I responded as I did.”<sup>119</sup>

Even more interesting than this incident was the U.S.’s response to Ahd Tamimi. There has been no support from human rights advocates or Western state officials. Groups who have long histories of supporting human rights campaigns in the global South have not uttered a word

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<sup>117</sup> Serhan, Yasmien. "A Symbol of the Palestinian Resistance for the Internet Age." *The Atlantic*. January 05, 2018. Accessed March 22, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/internet-famous-in-the-west-bank/549557/>.

<sup>118</sup> McBride, Meredith. "Separate and Unequal: Inside Israel's Military Courts, Where the Only Defendants Are Palestinians." *Haaretz.com*. January 15, 2018. Accessed March 22, 2018. <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-separate-and-unequal-a-look-inside-israel-s-military-courts-1.5453846>.

<sup>119</sup> Cock, Sybil. "For International Women's Day My Hero Is Ahd Tamimi." *Counterfire*. March 08, 2018. Accessed March 22, 2018. <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/opinion/19522-for-international-women-s-day-my-hero-is-ahed-tamimi>.

on the injustices against Ahd as she awaits trial on a case in which she is almost surely to be convicted for. If Ahd is the epitome of an empowered feminist who uses her voice to criticize human rights abuses, then why is she forgotten? It seems as though the answer lies in the fact that the perpetrator was a state actor. Because the Israeli state was responsible for the violence against her and her family, human rights groups and the UN have decided to overlook the wrongdoing and disempower her. In an Al Jazeera opinion piece, columnist Shenila Khojla-Moolji asks, “Why is the West praising Malala but ignoring Ahd?”<sup>120</sup> Analyzing the differing responses to Ahd and Malala makes clear the way selective human rights in the West comes into practice.

On the other hand, Malala Yousafzai’s story is one of international prominence. In 2012, when Malala was returning home from her school in northern Pakistan, the Taliban shot her in the head. Malala was targeted by the Taliban because of her outspoken condemnation of the Islamic extremist group and her support for education for girls. The shooting was denounced worldwide (as it should have been) and Malala’s story gained widespread attention in the West.<sup>121</sup> Since then, international human rights organizations have repeatedly lauded Malala and have made her into an iconic symbol of female empowerment against radical Islamic groups. UNESCO launched a campaign called “Stand up for Malala,” former President of the United States, Barrack Obama, invited her to the White House, Malala spoke in front of the UN General Assembly, and in 2014 she won the Nobel Peace Prize. Malala’s story may be an exceptional case, but it begs the question of why her story was chosen to become the symbol of young

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<sup>120</sup> Khoja-Moolji, Shenila. "Why Is the West Praising Malala, but Ignoring Ahd?" Palestine | Al Jazeera. December 28, 2017. Accessed March 22, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/west-praising-malala-ignoring-ahed-171227194606359.html>.

<sup>121</sup> Al Jazeera. "Pakistani Schoolgirl in UK for Treatment." Afghanistan News | Al Jazeera. October 15, 2012. Accessed March 22, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2012/10/20121015152449682226.html>.

female voices speaking out against human rights abuses. Why is it that Malala is celebrated on such an international stage while Ahd Tamimi's name is one left in obscurity?

Both of these young women fought against institutions of injustice in exceptionally brave ways. In theory, both should be celebrated, especially by those who advocate for the image of an empowered woman in the Muslim world. However, Malala's story is one that is that is celebrated while Ahd's is overlooked primarily because in the case of Malala, her perpetrator was the Taliban, the enemy of the U.S. state. On the other hand, in the case of Ahd, the perpetrators were IDF soldiers and state actors. Malala's story fits very neatly into the Western narrative of white saviors saving marginalized Muslim women from savage men. Ahd's story, however, does not fit into this agenda as supporting Ahd would necessarily mean condemning the Israeli state, a state that is propped up by U.S. military interest. It is a foundational assumption in ethics, that the wrongness of an act is independent of the identity of the perpetrator itself. So then why is the state not held accountable to the same standards as a terrorist group according to international human rights standards? Given that international human rights are almost completely set up by state systems, the lack of support for Ahd becomes clear. The discrepancy reveals how the U.S. decides to overlook human rights abuses. At the end of the day, according to U.S. policy, the IDF is friend and Taliban is enemy. The media simply follows suit and that is how human rights work on the international stage.

## Conclusion

The reality is that in today's increasingly globalized world, certain nations have benefitted disproportionately at the expense of others. The West has profited immensely on the destruction of other communities, and the displaced are living the daily realities of those repercussions. So where to go from here? It may seem like the problems of mass displacement are too formidable to take on. With historically unprecedented numbers of displaced people, the world is confronting major global challenges—ones that can only be solved by mass, radical empathy on the part of society as a whole. Is this feasible? How can this be done? Only once we put our own actions in context with the “refugee problem” can we understand that it is not refugees' problem, after all, but “ours,” collectively, as a global society. We have contributed to the systemic injustices that have prioritized capital again and the fortification of the state over humanity, which means that we have the power to change that, as well. I did not write this thesis simply to outline how terrible many refugees' predicament is. Instead, my goal is to contribute to the ongoing conversation about how we, the global community, are implicated in it. This crucial understanding—that we are complicit—gives us the possibility that there is hope, and that the power to change an unjust system is within us, just unrealized.

So how is this problem really “our” problem? The problem is “our problem” for we have come to accept a world in which people are thrown out of their home countries, forced to wait in a country of asylum, and are unlikely to ever be resettled. The problem is that we accept the state's power to restrict a parent from working to support his or her family. The problem is that we believe it is acceptable for the state to deny a kid's education because he or she is “illegal.” The problem is our own for thinking that our systems of borders are natural—that land needs to be divided in neat sections where bodies have to be tracked and contained. The problem is that

we have internalized that injustices that are part of an imperial project are unavoidable consequences of an overburdened system—that a slow resettlement case is just a bureaucratic inefficiency. The problem is that we believe that the UNHCR and the state, are forces of “good” trying to vet the “good” people from the “bad” people. The problem is that we are able, to and readily do, brand certain people as “evil” and accept others as “good.” The “refugee problem” at the end of the day, is our own fault for imbibing the state project of stripping complex dimensions from diverse people with varied interests, different stories, and dynamic aspirations. The “refugee problem” is not about “them,” it is about “us.”

After transcribing all the interviews, I faced incredible difficulty in understanding what to make of them. Each narrative was so unique and each interviewee had a nuanced and diverse perspective. So how could I find the common trend? That is what I was supposed to be looking for, right? After days of fretting over trying to find the “trends,” I came to the understanding that these variations were what I was looking for all along. The counter-narrative is not one type of narrative. It is simply a means of “messaging” up that one clean, normative refugee story. The counter-narratives I collected were diverse in thought, story, and perspective because that is what muddles our fixed notion of how things are supposed to be. Because refugees are so much more complicated than one narrative, and because people are so much more complicated than one narrative, fixed narratives are problematic as they reinforce standing power imbalances. It is our own responsibility to confront these narratives and try to shine light on the complexity that is so often obscured by the powers working to keep the oppressed at the margins.



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