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In 2015, the number of displaced persons worldwide reached 65.5 million, the highest levels recorded in history; in the years since, that number has only grown. While millions around the world are forcibly displaced, only a minute fraction experience permanent resettlement outside of the country of asylum. In 2015, 69,933 refugees resettled in the United States. Ahmad, an Iraqi national who settled in North Carolina, was one of them. At the heart of this thesis lies a broad question—how might the world, and one’s place within it, be reconceived as result of becoming a refugee, and what negotiations of the self may occur in response? In this thesis, I utilize the life history to explore this question and provide a nuanced, granular view of Ahmad’s experience of refugeehood and resettlement in the United States.

Mediated by his past, as well as the unique context of the historical moment of resettlement—in the throes of the 2016 presidential campaign and the subsequent 45th presidential administration—Ahmad’s narrative highlights the tensions between belonging and unbelonging in America, and the negotiations of self that occur in response. Within his post-resettlement story of self, we see how he employs his perceived normalcy, work and self-sufficiency, and legality to differentiate himself from immigrants deemed socially ‘undesirable’ in response to this uncertainty. I suggest that these negotiations of the ‘deserving self’ are, for Ahmad, the effect of a ‘precarious belonging’ within the United States due to his legal-yet-liminal status as a permanent resident. Within his history, we can see the influence of both past and present, as he pursues this new life and claims his ‘place’ in America.

A PRECARIOUS HISTORY: WAR, SANCTUARY, SELF, AND (UN)BELONGING IN AMERICA

by

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Dr. Steve Kroll-Smith
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DEDICATION

*For Ahmad and Maysa, I remain honored to be entrusted with your stories, and the
chance to share them.*

*And for Ayslee, for so willingly walking this path with me for so many years, and for
giving me a reason.*

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the website for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR (2018a: para 1), proclaimed the world was “witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record” with approximately 65.5 million displaced peoples worldwide. Of those currently experiencing displacement in the same year, approximately 22.5 million were recognized as refugees (UNHCR 2018a). While that drastic declaration no longer remains on the UNHCR website, the number of displaced peoples worldwide has only increased. At the end of 2020, a record 82.4 million people around the world were in the throes of forced displacement, 26.4 million of which are categorized as refugees (UNHCR 2021). As the discrepancy in the displacement and refugee figures suggests, the ‘making of a refugee’ is a complex, and often politicized operation.

Of those compelled to cross international borders for fear of persecution, some may be “legitimized” through a Refugee Status Determination made by the UNHCR and/or governmental entities within the country of asylum (UNHCR 2018b). This designation and any subsequent outcomes, including potential eligibility for resettlement¹ are influenced by any number of individual and bureaucratic factors, and political contexts. Though few ever receive approval for permanent resettlement, most who do only begin that process after fleeing their countries of origin. However, a select few traverse a different, though still arduous pathway to find a new home. Direct access to the United States resettlement program is, for example, made available to certain nationals meeting certain requirements, through the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program. Tied to services supporting American military actions and personnel during

¹ Often referred to as ‘third-country resettlement,’ permanent resettlement provides a pathway to legal access and recognition within a new host country, rather than repatriation or remaining in the country of asylum. While circumstances vary, asylum often do not provide the same legal rights and recognition as permanent resettlement.

conflict, the SIV program provides a resettlement pathway for individuals, and their families, who have put themselves at risk to support the political desires of the United States. At present, legislation is in place to allow Iraqi and Afghani nationals access to the program.

No matter how one comes to be ‘resettled,’ resettlement approval is only one of many steps in a lengthy and sweeping social process thrust upon those who seek sanctuary. The ability for these individuals to carry on through experiences of persecution or threat,² a lengthy and difficult eligibility process, and subsequent acculturation to a new homeland highlights their perseverance and resiliency. But even more salient is the capacity to rework and expand one’s sense of self within a dynamic social context comprised of changing status, social ties, and group memberships, amongst shifting spaces, circumstances, and expectations.

Resettlement Eligibility

Referral for refugee resettlement by the UNHCR, in lieu of repatriation or permanent settlement in the country of asylum, occurs only after all other options are exhausted. Of those who receive a refugee status determination, less than one percent receive this referral (UNHCR 2018b). It is only those deemed ‘the most vulnerable,’ (such as children, women, and girls at risk, survivors of torture or violence, or those with urgent medical needs) who are typically considered for resettlement (UNHCR 2018b). Even after receiving this referral, refugees must undergo a lengthy, intensive, and invasive process to determine eligibility. Extensive information, including both biometric and biographical data, is collected. For those under consideration for resettlement in the United States, the process is even more stringent than that

² The United Nations Refugee Convention (1951:14) defines refugees as those with “a wellfounded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” who are outside of their country of origin and, due to such fear, are unable to seek that country’s protection. The Refugee Crisis Act (2007:1) is intended to provide for certain individuals who have “worked directly with, or are threatened by their association with, the United States.” Petitioners are required to establish they have experienced an “ongoing serious threat” as a result of this affiliation (USCIS 2021 n.p.).

required by the UNHCR. It is common for these additional security screenings and approvals to take up to two years, and sometimes longer, to complete (UNHCR 2018b).

Despite America's sometimes tumultuous relationship with those seeking refuge throughout its history (Haines 2012), over 3.1 million refugees have been resettled in the United States since 1975 (US Department of State N.d.). But, the politics of United States refugee resettlement have always been informed by government interests, both at home and abroad (Brown and Scribner 2014; Haines 2012). Eligibility for resettlement in the United States often hinges on factors beyond those of interest to the UNHCR. Resettlement approval may come, in part, due to "membership in a group that is of special concern to the United States" (American Immigration Council 2016:5), such as that legislated by the SIV program. The political nature of these decisions is evidenced not only by those populations chosen to be of 'special interest,' but also by the annual refugee admissions limits (and regional allocations) set by the President of the United States and Congress (Bruno 2017).

Refugees in the United States

In 2015, a total of 69,933 individuals, from 69 different countries, were granted refuge in the United States and began the next steps of their journey in the search towards 'home' (Refugee Processing Center 2018a and 2018b).³ Despite having successfully steered one's way through the resettlement approval process, the path for many newcomers remains tumultuous. Along this sustained trajectory—from fleeing, to resettlement, to acclimation, acculturation, and ongoing integration—refugees are made and marked with documents, signatures, interviews, and case files. At the same time, movements through and resettlement

³ Yearly refugee admissions are based on the fiscal year (FY) which runs from October 1 to September 30.

within a new society and culture mandate the continued navigation of, and adaptation to, an unfamiliar world.

My aim in this project is to bring to life, to animate, how one individual successfully negotiated this complex, winding path through changing geographies, cultures, and communities to claim his 'place' in the United States. I want to tell, to narrate, how he navigated these changes, and how these shifting social worlds influenced his understandings of just who he is. In this thesis, I explore lived experiences both before and after resettlement, and the navigations of self, society, and world in sanctuary as evidenced through the narrative of one who has lived it.

Research Questions

This project was driven by a broad research inquiry: *how is the world, and one's place within it, re-conceived as result of being made a refugee, and what negotiations of the self may occur in response?* Using the life history approach, further explained in Chapter 3, I aimed to better understand this experience aided by three exploratory, and interrelated questions. First, how might one assess, define, and make sense of the shifting worlds a person encounters in the before and after of resettlement? Second, how does someone align their senses of who they are, their selves, to these morphing worlds? Third, how does this newcomer adopt, adapt, refute, or transform the expectations others impose on him as he makes his way to a new way of being in the world?

It is worth noting that, while these questions were employed to initially focus the life history, these are not questions to be answered succinctly within this thesis. Instead, these inquiries served as a broad base for conceptualizing this project. During our interviews, I aimed to approach Ahmad's history with an open mind, and to allow his story to inform both what was of relevance to this project, and the path that it would take. My work, in short, is more informed by the inductive than the deductive.

To better grapple with such an expansive question, negotiations of self and identity served as preliminary sensitizing concepts. However, as May (2013), and Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy (2019) suggest, identity does not meaningfully speak to affective connections, or the desires to be and to become, that Ahmad's life-story illuminates. Over the course of our conversations and the construction of this life history, I came to find that belonging was a far more salient lens through which to better understand his experience in the United States. Taking place in multiple dimensions and scales, belonging provides both the breadth and depth required to better understand Ahmad's understandings of himself in this new life. We will explore this, and other related aspects of his present experience, in Chapter 5.

While I aimed to illuminate the changes that occur post-resettlement, the fact is that the pathway from becoming a refugee to being 'resettled' is likely to lack either a fixed trajectory or a finite resolution. Beyond the officially legislated labels imposed upon those living this experience it seems likely that, for many, 'resettlement' lacks any definitive beginning or final endpoint. Moreover, as Giddens (1991) reminds us, self-making is a reflexive process; our narratives are continually revised to maintain continuity and as a result of often subtle, yet shifting visions, of who we are and aim to become. With this in mind, I begin with the supposition that examining these changes in resettlement requires an understanding contextualized by lived experiences both pre- and post-resettlement, rather than a simple focus on life within the United States. Ahmad's past is, as we will find in Chapter 4, extraordinary. Moreover, while its weight in the present is sometimes hidden, it remains an important part of how he understands himself and the world around him.

Ideas are interesting, of course, but a person's life is vastly more so. With Ahmad's story, I aim to provide a nuanced, granular look at the shifts in self and world that occur in making a new life in resettlement, and the influence of social context in informing and navigating these changes. Within this history, we will come to better understand a particular experience of

refugeehood and a life in sanctuary, and the complexities inherent in negotiating the self and belonging within the unique context of a particular point in American history.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Driven by my sensitizing concepts and subsequent findings, my search of the literature aims to address several topics. I begin with a brief overview of American reception of refugees and other immigrants. This is followed by a review of key perspectives highlighting the role of context in integration, and recent United States demographic data typically used to measure refugee integration. Subsequently, I focus on broad conceptions of self and social identity as fluid responses to a sustained and bilateral process, the plurality of identity, and identity prioritization through *primary identity* and *master status*. Literature with a substantive focus on racial, ethnic, and religious identities within refugee and other immigrant populations is also included. Finally, I introduce some salient literature pertaining to belonging and its connection to self and identity, as well as recent findings connecting belonging to refugee lived experiences.

The American Context

Views about what it means to 'be American' vary widely. Related attitudes about who does and who does *not* belong seem to portray drastically different notions of America. Though the United States often proudly calls upon its history as a 'nation of immigrants' (Goodman 2015), the year 2016 also saw the election of a president quick to portray all Mexican immigrants as *bad hombres*⁴ and willing to fight in federal court to uphold an admission ban for refugees from targeted Middle Eastern and African countries. While such efforts at 'gatekeeping' are nothing new, they impart a radically different value on [some] immigrants and immigration than that suggested by the 'nation of immigrants' narrative that pervades much of American society (Lee 2002; Goodman 2015). In the wake of these events, debates regarding immigration

⁴ Donald Trump's remarks regarding Mexican immigrants were widely covered by the news media, including the broadcast of the third presidential debate by CNN. See CNN. 2016, October 19. "Donald Trump: We Need to Get Out 'Bad Hombres.'" YouTube. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AneeacsvNwU>.

of all types have ranged from fervent support for immigrants in the United States and others hoping to make their way to America's shores, to those arguing that such groups pose a considerable danger to an 'American way of life.'

Even refugees seeking resettlement due to a "wellfounded fear of persecution," as defined by the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, are not exempt from attempts at exclusion. The general reception for refugee resettlement in the United States can be described as tepid at best. Though conceptions of refugeehood are often bound up with a sense of vulnerability, and subsequently deservingness, one only need look back as far as 2017 to uncover a profusion of political efforts made at barring refugee entry to the United States, and social commentary applauding such endeavors. Refugee admissions have often been a contentious political and social topic in the United States, and refugees themselves have often been unwelcomed by many in American society (DeSipio and de la Garza 2015; Desilver 2015; Krogstad and Radford 2017).

Social Context and Immigrant Integration

Those that do make their way to the United States encounter unique experiences of integration and life in America, based on a variety of factors. While some research argues that straight-line assimilation into an 'American mainstream' is highly likely to occur amongst second- or third-generation immigrants (Alba and Nee 1997), other findings propose a variety of immigrant assimilation outcomes are possible (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2009). Crul and Schneider (2009:1250) similarly found that while upward mobility was the norm for immigrants in Europe, subsets of each group experienced less favorable outcomes leading them to note that "advancement and stagnation do not need to be mutually exclusive."

While none of these perspectives are intended as a theoretical framework for my thesis, all stress the role of social context. Portes et al. (2009), and Portes and Zhou (1993), suggested

the divergent possible outcomes for immigrants resulted from the confluence of individual human capital (educational and occupational skills) and family (composition) factors, as well as the social context of reception within the country of arrival. These modes of incorporation include governmental, societal, and community reception (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes et al. 2009). The interplay of these internal and external factors and the resources and vulnerabilities that accompany them, leads, they argue to different integration outcomes for immigrants: (a) acculturation and integration into “the white middle-class”; (b) downward assimilation into poverty and the lower class; or (c) upward mobility “with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community’s values and tight solidarity” (Portes and Zhou 1993:82). Documented in their work is the fundamental idea that those experiencing the best outcomes are often those following this third pathway to upward mobility.

Crul and Schneider (2010) however, conceptualized integration with a focus on belonging (both institutionally and via individual affect), and participation in social institutions. Here, institutional arrangements related to education, the labor market, housing, religion, and legislation, most specifically within the national context, are considered the primary contexts of integration (Crul and Schneider 2010). While both perspectives suggest a variety of assimilation pathways, the focus on institutional *process* proposed by Crul and Schneider (2010), in lieu of achieved *outcome* at a singular point in time, places the onus for integration on supportive institutional arrangements, rather than a mix of individual and contextual factors. With this framework, Crul and Schneider (2010:1249) asserted the key role of social and political contexts to “social and cultural participation and belonging.”

Language, Employment, and Income: Refugee Demographics and Outcomes

While the aforementioned studies suggest contextual factors likely to influence outcomes across immigrant generations, they do little to address the ‘first generation’ of non-native born in America. Regarding refugees, much is known of the demographic variables typically associated

with measures of ‘success’—including language proficiency, income, and employment. For example, refugees appear to have lower English proficiency than those from other immigrant groups (Connor 2010), with many having little to no proficiency upon arrival (Capps, Newland, Fratzke, Groves, Auclair, Fix, and McHugh Newland 2015). While 33 percent of those entering between the years 2008-2013 reported speaking ‘some English’ upon arrival, only 7 percent indicated they spoke it well. However, the accuracy of these assessments are unclear and somewhat problematic, as they rely on subjective self-reporting prior to resettlement and may overstate proficiency (Capps et al. 2015).

While English language skills generally improve after arrival, even amongst those who had been resettled for 20 or more years, the majority (58 percent) had only limited proficiency (Capps et al. 2015). Building proficiency in English is likely influenced, and complicated by, the limited schooling received by some refugees within their home countries. Capps et al. (2015) reported that many refugees are not literate in their primary languages, and is most likely to affect those from Afghanistan, Burma, Bhutan, Liberia, Somalia, and Laos. For these individuals, lack of literacy in their native language and the limited educational attainment it implies, often complicates the ability to build English proficiency. This, in turn, may impede efforts at integration (Capps et al. 2015).

Unsurprisingly, correlations also exist between recently arrived refugees with low education and literacy, and low incomes. In 2009-2011, for example, refugees from Somalia, Iraq, Burma, Bhutan, and Liberia—countries for which these characteristics are common, “had household incomes below twice the federal poverty level” (Capps et al. 2015:2), in comparison to one-third of those born in the United States. However, refugees are actually more likely to have gainful employment than the native-born population (Capps et al. 2015; Connor 2010). Specifically, refugee men were employed at 67 percent, compared to 62 percent of US-born men; both native-born and refugee women were equally likely to be employed, at 54 percent (Capps et al. 2015). But despite employment outcomes, refugees in America are more likely to

hold lower status 'unskilled' jobs, and earn lower wages, even in comparison to non-refugee immigrants (Connor 2010).

It seems likely that such outcomes are influenced by the many of the same contextual factors put forth in the integration theories discussed, but they do little to uncover the actual *lived* experience of resettlement and integration for American newcomers. How may the sense of self for recent immigrants, and particularly refugees, shift in response to these contextual factors as they evolve through the experience of seeking refuge and resettlement? Literature which specifically addresses the self, social identity, and belonging provides a good foundation for addressing such questions.

The Self and the Social

Who we understand ourselves to be is heavily informed by the social world which we inhabit. The self not only allows humans to live collectively, it is also, not surprisingly, a social obligation. We must fashion selves to live in society (Cooley 1964; Jenkins 2014; Mead 2015). While all sociological literature centers the self clearly within the realm of the social, the interactional nature of the self is the focus of some key literature, including the work of Cooley and Mead. For Cooley, the self is inherently interactional, and "always implies the presence of others" (Jenkins 2014:64). The concept of the 'looking glass self' is one that is formed as we 'imagine' the way we appear to others, and our subsequent emotive responses to those imaginings, all under the watchful gaze of those others (Cooley 1964). As we comprehend how others see us, we 'adjust' ourselves to the presumed expectations of others, and society at large.

Mead (2015:135) also positions the self as the product of interaction, arguing that social interaction spawns self-consciousness. However, his theory of self is less affective; Mead is particularly interested in the intricacies of the cognitive processes of the self. Mead's self is one that comes into being through both our social interactions, and the internal dialogue occurring

between the 'I' which acts, but cannot be known in the moment of action—and the 'me' which becomes known through reflection, and is grounded in the generalized other (Mead 2015:154; 176-179). For Mead, the very existence of the self is presupposed by the ability to conceive itself as both subject and object, a reflexive state that necessitates interaction with others and is only made tenable in relation to the world of the social (2015:137-138). The capacity to consider the self as an object requires the ability for it to be 'seen' and considered as a separate entity, perhaps not entirely separate from but also unbound by the physiology and affective states of the individual; this, in turn, permits consideration of itself in relationship to others, and its interaction with others (Mead 2015:192-199).

The individual, Mead argues, can only achieve this *objectification* of the self by indirectly “experie[n]c[ing] himself... from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs,” which requires “taking the attitudes of other individuals towards himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved” (Mead 2015:138). The self is not simply the individual existence among other things within the world, even if its actions are influenced by those objects. Instead, it comes into existence within and is created by these interactions.

Despite Mead's influence, his understanding of self has faced criticism for an overly simplistic view of society that fails to address the variations in lived experience, and does not adequately address issues pertaining to power or conflict (Burkitt 1991; Jenkins 2014). As Jenkins (2014:67) notes, social conflict in this view “is largely the result of poor communication.” Similarly, its interactional focus allows provides little space to consider institutional influence (Burkitt 1994; Jenkins 2014). Moreover, with its cognitive focus it lacks the potential to fully consider the affective components of the self (Jenkins 2014). In addition, Mead's theory puts forth an understanding of self comprised of separate, distinct parts which is unreflective of the way that most people experience themselves (Giddens 1984; Jenkins 2014). Instead, Jenkins

(2014:69) proposes a unitary version of the self that “[recognizes] selfhood as simultaneously cognitive and emotional, as a rich amalgam of knowledge and feelings, both individual and collective, and as thoroughly interconnected and interdependent.”

Like Mead and Jenkins, Giddens understands the self as reflexive. This reflexive self, Giddens (1991) argues, is a result of modernity and the social changes therein. Self-identity has become a ‘reflexive project,’ one through which individuals continually revise a sense of self to maintain continuity over time, and craft self-narratives which provide a sense of control over individual trajectories (Giddens 1991:9; 52-55). Nonetheless, the experience of modernity is a mediated one, influenced by abstract systems and the broader social structure, both of which exert more influence, but also provide more choice, than ever before (Giddens 1991).

Risk and uncertainty, however, are also central as brought forth by a globalized world as well as the loss of ‘traditional’ ontological frameworks. Ontological security, or trust in the continuity of the self and world, is fundamental to ‘bracketing out’ the anxiety of the everyday, and meaningfully carrying out our lives. Self-making in the context of modernity, Giddens asserts, both provides innumerable options, but also enforces personal everyday choices regarding ways of being and orientation toward the world (1991:14; 80-86). This plurality of choice, in a sense, obligates the reflexive project of self, which often takes form through consumerism and other lifestyle choices, as well as in our relationships to others.

While there is clear value in Giddens’ theory, it also raises some questions of applicability and relevancy. Any consideration of lived experience outside of the West, or even perhaps in certain swaths of the ‘developed world,’ must acknowledge that Giddens’ notion of self in modernity is one that posits its influence through a lens which is likely not applicable to many individuals around the world. In response, Jenkins (2014:36) questions where it leaves the millions of individuals in the West, and elsewhere, who do not spend their time “agonizing over ‘life narratives’ and ‘personal growth.’” Moreover, how does it speak to those that do not have the luxury of the reflexive self-making as often articulated within this understanding of self?

Social Identity

Identities are a key part of understanding selves. As Jenkins (2014:51) explains, the self is, in fact, the individual's sense of her or his own 'particular' identity informed by similarities and differences amongst others, without which people "wouldn't know who they are and hence wouldn't be able to act." Negotiations of self and self-identity, and the unfolding and navigation of this perpetual process of 'becoming' in the wake of extraordinary circumstances as experienced by refugees, is a primary interest of this project.

While refugee identities are individually experienced, they are resultant of complex and intertwined social forces, contexts, and processes. Jenkins (2014:18) argued that all human identities, rooted as they are in meaning, are inextricable from the social; all identities, in some way, are social identities. Social identity and related perspectives firmly ground the individual conception of self within the realm of the social. Identity, in this way, is the result of constructing, delineating, and creating meaning based on understandings of similarity or difference (Jenkins 2014:18-19). Moreover, it is the product of these processes, as they occur, between individuals and groups, through their interactions with other individuals and collectives (Jenkins 2014:39-50). While the breadth of literature is considerable, and varies to a degree in its understanding, framing, and emphasis, social identities are often conceived as *mutable* understandings of self, forged through ongoing *bilateral processes*, and existing in *multiplicity* (Jenkins 2014:44; 86-91; 133-134).

Identity emerges in the synergy, the collaboration, between the individual and the social (Jenkins 1996; Hacking 1985). Building on the works of Cooley and Mead, Jenkins (2014) argued that both individual and collective identities are forged through an 'internal-external dialectical' process. In this sense, conception of self is only derived and given meaning through the process of ongoing socialization and interactions with others that inform who we perceive ourselves, and others, to be. Understanding identity in this way asserts its mutability. Identity implies not only a state of existence, but one of perpetual action—that of 'being,' or movement

towards 'becoming,' as a result of sustained interaction with others, and continual construction of others and the self in response (Jenkins 2014). Who we are, then, "is never a final or settled matter" (Jenkins 2014:18), but instead always in the process of being made, maintained, or shifted.

Further, it is not simply enough to claim an identity, it needs to be validated (or in some cases) refuted by those around us. Who we are perceived to be by others, Cooley taught us, is always confounded with how we see ourselves (1964). With the notion of *dynamic nominalism*, Hacking (1985) posited the role of social and/or institutional power as influential in identity validation, wherein ways of 'being' are constructed by both those with the power to name, and individuals who enact the reality of being a 'kind of person' (Hacking 1985:165). This suggests that the possibility of *being* a 'kind' of person in the world is only made possible by the classification of a 'kind' of individual—or rather, the ability to take on a given identity is only made possible once it is categorized as a valid 'way' of being (Hacking 1985:161, 165-168). This 'being made' has considerable implications for the individual, through which we become "not only what we did, do, and will do but also what we might have done and may do" (Hacking 1985:165). Conceptions of others and the self, then, are imposed through 'making up' people, informing the way one can exist within the world (Hacking 1985:165).

This 'naming,' or categorization of individuals (or identities), is one of many ways we make sense of our worlds, others, and ourselves; but, this goes far beyond the simple assignment of labels. Hacking (1985) highlighted not only processes of naming, or the creation of socially sanctioned ways of being (or not being) in the world, but also pondered its effects on those that it was meant to represent. While the role of socially and institutionally sanctioned labels, as well as the phenomenological, is implied, Jenkins (2014) pointed out the importance of differentiating between the 'named' and the 'lived.' Recognition that distinctions exist between the *nominal* and the *virtual*, or the lived experience of, a given identity, is vital (Jenkins 2014:46). Ethnic identities, which may experience change in name and meaning over time, exemplify this

necessity, as they “are *practical accomplishments* rather than *static forms*” (Jenkins 1994:218). Humans create, choose, and live their experience in response to these processes of external definition, ensuring that the practice, experience, and meaning that lies within the ‘nominal’ can be vastly different across individuals.

Moreover, a singular identity does not exist in isolation, but always as part of a multiplicity of interconnected conceptions of self; though some facets may take primacy in a specific context or remain more steadfast through the course of a life (Jenkins 1996). *Primary identities*, or those established early in life and ‘definitively embodied,’ are considered “more robust and resilient to change” (Jenkins 1994:43). Along with selfhood and human-ness, Jenkins (1994) argued that differentiating the self and others along the lines of gender is universal. In some cases, specified conceptions of race, and ethnicity may also become primary identities. As perhaps the most obviously visible ‘markers’ of human classification, sex, race, and ethnicity may become so integral to the way one is externally defined, (and thus to one’s sense of self) that they serve as the preeminent mode of defining the lived experience (Jenkins 1994).

While the concept of primary identity may imply individual agency, choice, and an aligned experiential conception of self, Hughes (1945) highlighted the role of external social definition in the primacy of an identity. By definition, a socially assigned *master status* defines expected individual characteristics so forcefully that it “tends to overpower, in most crucial situations, any other characteristic which might run counter to it” (Hughes 1945:349). As such, a master status may preclude the recognition of any other incongruent characteristics and associated identities by others. While such a status may, or may not, be individually internalized or refuted, it implies substantial influence and may place considerable constraint on the ways in which we understand ourselves, or others, to ‘be.’

Race and (Pan)Ethnic Identities, and Assimilation

The shifting, enduring, and dialectical nature of identity is particularly visible among migrants thrust into new social worlds. As el-Aswad explained, “some identities may be dissolved or vanished in the new society, while other identities gain new dimensions” as a result of the juncture of individual conceptions and external definitions (2006:113). Among many, this experience may entail a rapid transition from the position of majority in the country of origin, to the experience of being a minority within the host country (el-Aswad 2006).

For those confronted with a radically different understanding of race and ethnicity than those extant within their countries of origin, the matters of questioning, claiming, and/or re-negotiating these identities are likely to be particularly salient (Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000; el-Aswad 2006; Ajrouch and Kusow 2007). In the United States, racial classification often has considerable personal and social implications (Omi and Winant 2014). For newcomers, assuming (or accepting) a position upon either side of the white/non-white dichotomy is often seen as an imperative. Ajrouch and Jamal (2007:860) asserted that “Racial identity is one of the primary means by which immigrants assimilate to the United States.”

Research has suggested a multitude of variables which may influence the claiming of a white or non-white identity, including: religion, socioeconomic status, length of time in the United States (Ajrouch and Jamal 2007), and social position in country of origin relative to status in the new country (Ajrouch and Kusow 2007). Among Lebanese/Syrian, Palestinian, Yemeni, and Iraqi respondents, for example, Ajrouch and Jamal (2007) found significant relationships existed between declaring whiteness and greater length of time in the United States, not being Muslim, and higher age and education levels. Those who immigrated after 1990, as well as Muslims, were less likely to identify as white (Ajrouch and Jamal 2007). However, Ajrouch and Kusow noted that Lebanese Muslims living in the United States “tacitly accept the classification of white” (2007:90) and “embrace whiteness as a preferred social identity” (2007:82), suggesting that selection of a (non)white identity is also influenced by one’s (minority) position within the

country of origin. Here, identifying as white appeared influenced by its ability to elevate these immigrants from the minority status they had experienced as Muslims in their home country (Ajrouch and Kusow 2007:82-83). It is possible that claiming whiteness, for this group, was reflective of an aspiration for 'becoming,' rather than the experience of 'being.'

For others, the perception of belonging, or feelings of exclusion from, the prevailing 'mainstream' American society may play a more vital role in the assertion of a white or non-white identity (Ajrouch and Jamal 2007; Hein 1994). For example, while immigrants from both the Middle East, and Mexico, have been legally recognized as white by the United States government since the early 1900s, increasing evidence supports that many of both origins choose not to ascribe to the white label (Ajrouch and Jamal 2007; Naber 2000).

Adoption of (pan)ethnic identifications have also been associated with integration into American society (Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000; Hein 1994; Ajrouch and Jamal 2007). While noting that many [non-European] immigrants face inequalities due both to their migrant and minority status, Hein (1994:282) found identification as an (ethnic) minority to be indicative of "an adaptation to U.S. society, not a rejection of it" among Hmong immigrants in the United States. In their study of first-generation Dominican immigrants, Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral (2000) also noted that greater social integration in the United States led to greater adoption of the Hispanic or Latino pan-ethnic label. The implications of this integration or assimilation may, however, vary. As Ajrouch and Jamal (2007) explained, the adoption of an institutionally promoted label meant to differentiate, or 'other' some individuals may indicate 'w' on the other hand, while one constructed and/or defined by group members may be an indicator of upward assimilation into American society.

(Pan)Ethnic Identities: Distinguishing the Self, and 'Making Space'

While race is often intimately connected with conceptions of self and lived experience in America, Nagel (1994:152) argues that ethnicity "constructed out of the material of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry, or regionality" is (along with culture) the foundation of

identity. While ethnicity and race are distinct classifications, they are not discreet. Rather, racialization on the basis of ethnic characteristics have been used both historically (Lee 2002; Sanchez 1999) and in modern day (Ajrouch and Jamal 2007; Ong 1996) to racialize and preclude various groups from 'whiteness,' thus promoting their social and/or legal exclusion. As Ajrouch and Jamal (2007) discussed, national origin and religion have served as a means of socially excluding Middle Eastern immigrants from the 'white' definition, despite legal recognition as such.

However, ethnicity is also sometimes used by individuals as a means of distinguishing the self from an ascribed racial category. For example, a study of Eastern African immigrants in the United States showed that they employed ethnicity as a means of differentiating themselves from black Americans (Guenther, Pendaz, and Makene 2011). For these participants, Guenther et al. (2011) found that ethnicity was a means of constructing social distance from native blacks, with the hopes of promoting upward mobility.

Adoption of ethnic or pan-ethnic definitions of self can also serve as a means of attempting to find, or make space within, the dichotomous white/non-white racial categorization typical of America. Pan-ethnicity is a means of expanding identity beyond singular national or ethnic definitions by encompassing those groups under an umbrella of shared language, culture, and/or regional origin (Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000). Perhaps as a result, pan-ethnic groups are often portrayed as 'monolithic categories,' (Naber 2000:41-42) though individuals identifying within them may vary vastly in physical, ethnic, and cultural characteristics (Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000). This further problematizes where individuals within them 'belong' within the white/non-white binary (Naber 2000). Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral (2000) found that 70 percent of their largely first-generation immigrant respondents racially identified as either Latino or Hispanic, despite the fact that both are considered ethnic categories in the United States, thereby subverting this dichotomy. Thus, adoption of pan-ethnic identities, such as Latino or

Hispanic, may be a mode of 'finding a place' within America's racial hierarchy by "function[ing] as an intermediate racial category" (Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000:229).

Pan-ethnic Identities and Power

The creation and adoption of pan-ethnic identities has been suggested as a mechanism of attaining or asserting power for immigrant ethnic communities (Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000; Naber 2000). This may be particularly important for non-dominant groups, or in locations where a dominant group does not exist (Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral 2000). As Naber (2000:41) explained, the construction of a pan-ethnic Arab American identity in the 1960s was a political response meant to reclaim and redefine the 'mythological, derogatory' *Arab* label that had been enforced upon the community. In this way, adoption of the label of Arab American was a means through which they "deployed their racial/ethnic identity as a political strategy for claiming their rights" (Naber 2000:41). Among immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral (2000) also correlated the mobilization of a pan-ethnic Hispanic or Latino identity as a mode of asserting or claiming group political power. However, this appears more likely for some groups than others. For example, findings which highlighted the non-use of a pan-ethnic label in the Cuban community led Itzigsohn and Dore-Cabral (2000) to suggest that where one group is dominant (in size, politically, or economically) they may reject the pan-ethnic identity as a means to maintain control of resources.

Declaring Identity

Like race and ethnicity, conceptions of self forged from religious beliefs are of considerable importance. Hirschman (2004) suggested that, for those immigrating to America, religion may become even more important than it was in their country of origin. Religion and the religious communities, Hirschman (2004) explained, can serve as an anchor not only to religious practices but to other social traditions in the country of origin, which may seem to be threatened by adaptation to American society. Similarly, Peek's (2005) findings suggested that religion may

become of increasing importance to conception of the self when removed from the homeland—particularly if that religious affiliation is the ‘norm’ in country of origin but not in the host country.

Research suggests that religious identity may, over time, become more salient than national identity (Naber 2005), or synonymous with ethnicity (Hirschman 2004). Hirschman (2004) suggested that with time, integration to United States society for those from immigrant backgrounds is likely to occur with “[acquired] identities of ethnic Americans defined more by religion than by country of origin” (Hirschman 2004:1209). Peek (2005) described that, among her participants, stronger religious identification served as a basis for rejection of national and ethnic identities, which many believed to be against the tenets of Islam. Similarly, among Muslim youth participants from immigrant backgrounds, Naber (2005) found that many youth asserted a ‘Muslim first-Arab second’ identity. But while claiming religious identity may serve as an attempt to retain traditional values for some (Hirschman 2004), it may also serve as a means of eschewing those tradition. As Naber (2005) explained, by employing a ‘Muslim first’ identity, participants in her study were able to both maintain ties within their ethnic communities, while mobilizing their Muslim identities as a means of countering predominant racial and gendered constructions, and subsequent expectations within their families.

Peek (2005) posited three stages of this identity formation: *ascribed identity*, to *chosen identity*, and finally to *declared identity*. In moving toward declared identity, participant faith, practice, and religious identification intensified (Peek 2005:230-231). During the period of ascribed identity, participants reported feeling pressure to assimilate to the American ‘mainstream’ and some described “cast[ing] off their religious identity in an attempt to ‘pass’ as a part of mainstream society” (Peek 2005:226) as a result of stigmatization. The second stage of identity formation, *chosen identity*, was prompted by experiencing increases in agency and time for reflection, which occurred for many when they transitioned to college (Peek 2005). Creating connections and building friendships, as well as participation in Muslim Student Associations played a significant role “in constructing, reinforcing, and affirming the strong emerging religious

identity of almost all participants” (Peek 2005:228). In the final, or *declared* stage of religious identity formation, Peek (2005) explained that individuals came to identify even more strongly as Muslim, at least in part in response the events and aftermath of September 11, 2001.

Public misconceptions and/or hostilities may increase the salience of Muslim identity. And, such experiences may be common. For example, Sirin, Bikmen, Mir, Fine, Zaal, and Katsiaticas (2008) found that 88 percent of their respondents reported experiencing discrimination as Muslims in the past year; 13 percent reported it was a daily occurrence. Peek (2005) explained that asserting a strong Muslim identity became necessary for participants to both “retain a positive self-perception and correct public misconceptions” (Peek 2005:236). During this time, they described an increased drive to learn more about Islam and support fellow Muslims, motivated in part by the desire to be able to better respond to public condemnation (Peek 2005). However, unlike Peek’s (2005) participants, Sirin et al.’s (2008) findings did not suggest a relationship between experiences of discrimination and Muslim identity.

Despite the salience of Muslim identity, Sirin et al. (2008) found little evidence of conflict between identification of self as both Muslim and American. While participants expressed a stronger identification with the Muslim community than American society, 90 percent expressed these dual identities as either integrated (a blended whole) or as parallel (separate but stable parts of the self); only 10 percent of respondents expressed ‘conflict’ resultant from their conception of self as both Muslim and American (Sirin et al. 2008).

Belonging

Our senses of self and identity, as previously discussed, are created and positioned in relationship to others in the world. But our understandings of self are not simply static, cognitive categorizations. Being, and becoming, is a process often forged from affective desires and attachments to other people, or ways of being in the world, and May (2013) suggests that belonging is inherent in selfhood. The concept of belonging and belongingness speaks more

meaningfully to the affective connections between individuals and others that heavily inform our sense of who we are and want to be amongst others in the world (May 2013; Probyn 1996; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). As Probyn (1996:19) points out,

[Belonging] captures more accurately the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fueled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state.

Belonging is not only a sense of where and with whom we belong but also our desires regarding those memberships and relationships; belonging, Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) argues allows us to better understand the dynamic nature of self-identity. Moreover, May (2013) argues, the lens of belonging, in contrast to identity, is more appropriate to an understanding of the self as relational. While the concept of identity “begins from the separate, autonomous individual, ‘belonging’ focuses on what connects people to one another” (May 2013:9). This rests, in part, on the necessity of others to agree that we do, in fact, belong. In effect, belongingness is not a singular, individual achievement. Instead, it is state of being that, in relationship to others in the world, is built not only on our wants, but requires the recognition of others (May 2013).

Definitions of belonging vary, but often conjure an emotive sense of security, or comfortability in relationship to physical and/or social environments, including the other objects and/or people within them. Belonging can be understood as a sense of safety (Ignatieff 2003; Yuval-Davis 2006; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). For those experiencing resettlement, this sense of safety can be a vital piece of feeling like they ‘belong’ in the experience of resettlement (Dromgold-Sermon 2019; Gowayed 2019). Relatedly, a sense of ‘comfort’ has been both tied to ontological security and subsequent senses of belonging in the broader social sphere for those in a new land (Noble 2005).

Belonging is also both multidimensional and occurs on multiple scales (May 2013; Yuval-Davis 2006). We can experience belonging in concrete ways, within certain spaces and amongst those with whom we interact in the day-to-day; we also often experience a sense of 'belonging' amongst abstract groups of which we may be a part, but that remain comprised of individuals we will never know (Yuval-Davis 2006). Such is often the case of a sense of 'national belonging,' or at other large scales.

Inherent in belonging is also unbelonging. Boundaries are constructed to delineate 'who is one of us' and who is not., often through the 'politics of belonging,' or the political and ethical values used to make judgment and inform these boundaries (Yuval-Davis 2006). At a national scale, the politics of belonging are aimed at "constructing a sense of belonging to particular collectivities, which are themselves being assembled through these projects and placed within specific boundaries" (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019:7). Belonging within the nation is not solely a function of citizenship or legal status, but rather also obligates a sense of acceptance and welcome. In the realm of the political, Gowayed (2019) found that anti-immigrant and anti-refugee policies and statements contributed to a sense of unbelonging despite legal residency.

As this suggests, literature on belongingness within refugee populations often paints a negative picture. Abu El-Haj (2015) found that, everyday encounters with others, as well as institutional structures contributed to sense of 'unsettled' belonging in the United States amongst transnational Palestinian youth who experienced prejudice, as well as more banal senses of un-recognition. Everyday experiences of racism and discrimination (Gowayed 2019) and relatedly, othering (Khoshnevis 2019) also contributes to a sense of not belonging amongst those in resettlement.

CHAPTER III: THE LIFE HISTORY METHOD

The feasibility of this thesis rested on the assumption that refugees have stories to tell about how their lived experiences have changed, or perhaps in some cases reinforced, their understandings of the world and ways of 'being' in the world, prior to undertaking the journey of resettlement. As such, I adopted a phenomenological approach focused on recording and interpreting the experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of those who have, more often than not, unwittingly found themselves forced upon this extraordinarily life-altering path. Developing knowledge pertaining to these questions requires a telling, and retelling, of the refugee experience which can only be obtained firsthand, through their own words. My aim to identify and track the experience of complex life chances triggered by uprooting and resettlement warranted a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis.

The Life History as Method, and a Note on Terminology

My interest, broadly put, is in the life stories of refugees and what can be learned by attentively listening to their lived experiences. The method most suiting to this interest and inquiry is the life history. As Plummer (1983:67) highlighted,

... life history research advocates, first and foremost, a concern with the phenomenal role of lived experience, with the ways in which members interpret their own lives and the world around them... There may be many ways of getting at the phenomenology of experience, but in the end there is probably no substitute for spending many hours talking with the subject, gathering up his or her perceptions of the world... and developing an intensive intimate familiarity with one concrete life.

The life history is sometimes also referred to as the *life story*. It is also sometimes used interchangeably with other terms, such as *life course research*, or simply the biographical or *narrative approach*. With others, I share the view that the life history method is located under the

umbrella of the biographical perspective, which encompasses the life history, as well as other similar but distinct terms and methods (Miller 1999; Cole and Knowles 2001; Roberts 2002).

Roberts (2002) distinguishes between use of the terms life history and life story, noting that the *story* is told by the narrator/participant, while the *history* is interpreted and retold by the researcher. While this clearly positions my thesis in the life history method, in constructing this narrative I employ the terms history and story interchangeably. Moreover, it's worth noting that these conceptualizations are hardly mutually exclusive. While I made every effort to provide my interlocutor space to share his stories as he perceived them, I would be remiss to assume that our interactions were in no way influenced by my own interpretations of his perceptions and experiences shared over the course of multiple conversations. Moreover, in the purview of my participant these are not simply his stories, but very much his history as he lived it.

History of the Method

The life history and similar methods have a considerable, but often forgotten, history of their own within the social sciences. While [some] biographical perspectives have been an object of interest for over a millennia in other disciplines, it was not until the 19th century that their value to social science was considered. Miller (1999:4) noted that Dilthey, recognizing the "life story as a whole, an object complete unto itself" was likely the first to consider the life history an object suitable for theorizing in the social sciences.

It was not until several decades later, however, that the life history method made its mark in sociology. Thomas and Znaniecki's (1958) multivolume *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, originally published between 1918 and 1920, is likely the most influential and well-known early example (Plummer 1983; Miller 1999). Subsequently, use of the life history became common, particularly by the Chicago school, and often in the study of deviance. Clifford Shaw's *The Jack Roller* (1966; originally published in 1930) is one common example (Plummer 1983;

Miller 1999). At this time, Miller (1999:4) emphasized, “the life history method was central to the Chicago School.”

Over time, a shift towards survey data and quantitative methods sidelined the life history, and to a degree, other qualitative methods; but, the life history and similar methods have seen a resurgence of sorts in the last few decades. C. Wright Mills’ (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, which advocated centering the intersections of biography, history, and society in sociological study is suggested as a prime influence, though it does not speak directly to the method (Plummer 1983; Miller 1999). Further, the nature of the life history as a method which ‘gives voice’ to the individual, and requires a level of researcher reflexivity, has bolstered its use as a feminist methodology (Cole and Knowles 2001).

Characteristics of the Life History Method

The life history method is characterized by an in-depth, holistic attention to the life, or lives, of a small number of participants. These histories are typically collected over time, through an extensive interview process. Interview data is sometimes supplemented by participant observation, the review of life ‘artifacts,’ and interviews with others where appropriate (Plummer 1983; Miller 1999). In their accounts, researchers aim to highlight the individual experience in all its complexity, and as situated within broader social circumstances.

The life history method is not intended as an exercise in generalizability, as Cole and Knowles explain (2001). Rather, it seeks to add to literature an in-depth understanding of the nuance and complexities of lived experiences, as they are lived out within, and as a part of, the larger social context. It is this intersection between the individual life history and the critical role of social and cultural contexts in shaping that story that distinguishes the life history from similar methods. Cole and Knowles (2001:11) suggest,

In as much as it is humanly possible, life history inquiry is about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and

understand the experiences of other humans...To understand some of the complexities, complications, and confusions within the life of just one member of a community is to gain insights into the collective.

This is not meant as a claim of inference to a broader population. Rather, Cole and Knowles (2001) argued that each deep-dive into the 'messiness' of the human experience refines our understanding of the complexities of individual lives lived in social worlds. Plummer (1983:68) further elaborate, "our lives are often flooded with moments of indecision, turning points, confusions, contradictions and ironies." Despite this, much of social science research ignores these realities, often "giv[ing] form and order to the world which it frequently does not have" (Plummer 1983:68). The life history, instead, aims to bring this complexity to the fore, front and center.

The life history is particularly apt to provide space for the stories that lie at the heart of my inquiry into the morphing meanings of self, of identity, for those that traverse the path toward refuge in search of someplace else to call "home." While other methods, such as interviews with more specific lines of questioning, may be more 'economical' or traditional in approach, they allow only limited exploration of lived experiences shaped by extraordinary circumstances. To truly get at how the worlds of refugees are upended, and how their ways of conceiving, and being within, the world are altered as a result, requires a deep exploration of their lives. The life history's focus on the experience of life *over time* makes it a good choice for building insight into how refugees' perceptions and meanings morph and change in response to the many and varied social worlds encountered in search of a place they might call 'home' (Miller 1999).

The added emphasis of the life history method on situating individual narratives within social contexts make it well-suited to both illuminating 'the social' while not losing the individual within the milieu. While qualitative methods are not unusual in research within refugee populations, research designs can result in considerable abstraction of their experiences which necessarily limit complex, contextual understandings. The small sample size and intent of the

life history, however, provides a unique space for acknowledging the value of these rich narratives of lived experiences in the making of a more personal, granular knowledge.

Participant Recruitment

Greensboro, North Carolina has served as a refugee resettlement area for many years through the present, and there is a considerable local refugee population. Upon arrival, many newcomers obtain support services, such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, from local organizations in place to serve this population. My affiliation with one of these agencies as an intern and volunteer assisted with recruitment.

Necessarily, use of the life history method limited my choice of participants in several ways. Most notably, it required participants with high level English proficiency due to extensive interaction and communication during data collection, as well as those with the time and interest to share their stories across multiple interviews. In light of these limitations, I chose to ‘cast a wide net’ and not preclude participation based on country or origin or sex. Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age, legally resettled in the United States, and currently residing in the Piedmont Triad, NC region. At the request of the Institutional Review Board, outreach to possible participants that met age, language, and legal status requirements were made on my behalf, by passing along information about my research and my contact information for those interested.

Collecting The Life Story

I aimed to find between one and three participants interested in sharing their life stories, in order to construct one or more targeted life histories. Note, I use the word “targeted” to modify life history to signal that I am interested primarily in a certain span of years and experiences that make up a person’s life. In the end, I conducted interviews with three participants. However, the level of interaction and number of interviews varied for each participant, mostly based on continued availability. For example, while one was quite eager to participate, changes in

circumstance made it difficult for us to continue a conversation after our first meeting. While I was unable to construct a life history based on our interview, we did stay in touch informally and she continued to share several personal writings, as well as to provide several book recommendations on Iraqi history through this process.

The life history that follows is that of Ahmad, who quickly became my 'primary' participant for reasons of both his interest in this project and his availability. It is occasionally supplemented by the stories of Maysa, his sister-in-law and a vital member of their household, who expressed interest in sharing her stories during my first meeting at their home. Maysa has lived with Ahmad and his family for over 15 years, both in Iraq and in the United States. While I was unable to gather enough data to construct a full history of her life, her stories are woven through parts of Ahmad's narrative to further contextualize the experience of living through the sectarian war, and the early days of resettlement in the United States.

Data collection took place through loosely structured and unstructured interviews. My primary goal was to listen and learn from my participants, trusting that they would teach me what was salient, what I needed to know to answer my broader questions. And, they did not disappoint. While I prepared a list of preliminary guiding questions in advance of each interview 'just in case,' these were ultimately unneeded.

The first interview session was reserved for collecting Ahmad's uninterrupted, undirected life history as he saw fit to share it (Plummer 1983; Rosenthal 1993). After reviewing study information and informed consent materials, I simply asked him to share his life story with me. My first meeting with Ahmad lasted approximately three and a half hours and resulted in approximately two and a half hours of recorded interview; I asked four follow-up questions over the course of our conversation.

Subsequent interviews consisted of open-ended questions aimed at elaboration on perceptions and events brought forth in prior interviews, and confirming or clarifying my interpretations. All interviews were audio-recorded with files stored and transcriptions de-

identified to maintain confidentiality. I relied on pseudonyms throughout the data collection process.

In total I conducted seven interviews resulting in approximately ten and a half hours of audio recording, between March 2019 and May 2021. While I remained in touch with Ahmad via occasional text messaging, interviews and other meaningful communication were initially hindered on both sides by unexpected obligations, and complications from the COVID-19 pandemic, which extended the timeframe for our conversations beyond what was originally anticipated. In the end, this provided an unexpected yet interesting opportunity to briefly consider his experiences of resettlement across two vastly different presidential administrations. Interview data was supplemented by notes from several informal in-person conversations taking place before and after my recorded interviews with Ahmad and Maysa. I also obtained data during several telephone conversations with Ahmad.

Creating the Life History

For this project—as with many employing the life history method—data collection and analysis took place concurrently (Plummer 1983; Miller 1999; Cole and Knowles 2001). Plummer (1983:85) noted that, while such an approach may be difficult, “analysis of data should *always* accompany the research interviewing since accumulated data should shape the problems to follow.” After transcribing, interviews were reviewed for key personal and socio-historical events, and preliminary themes connected to perceptions, feelings, and ways of being, and change across time. This then informed the creation of a general plotline for Ahmad’s narrative, as well as follow-up questions related to both chronology and themes for subsequent interviews.

As themes and direction emerged, I began reconstructing his narrative: reading transcripts, writing, re-reading through transcripts, revising, and weaving in socio-historical context. In order to situate the individual experience within the ‘social,’ it was also necessary to

review and include information from a variety of other sources. Materials used include governmental and intergovernmental reports and documents, speech transcripts, news media articles and videos, and social media posts, as well as academic literature speaking to the historical and social context of Iraq and the United States.

Ahmad's life history follows in the next two chapters. In Chapter 4, I briefly explore his background, as well the first four 'eras' of his life, as he laid them out during our first interview. Within these eras, we will see Ahmad's quick transition from a hopeful young man with a bright world and future before him, to a soldier grappling with the losses of war, a self that could have been, and the idyllic visions of his homeland from his youth. Though he welcomed the end of the war era, survival under international embargo wrought its own tragedies, further stunting the possibilities existent in his life in Iraq. The 2003 ousting of Saddam Hussein and subsequent occupation of Iraq by the United States marks Ahmad's third era; but, as we will see, the hope of this historical moment were quickly dashed by the chaos and terror of the sectarian war. In this fourth era, his final in Iraq, Ahmad's history provides some sense of the 'unimaginable' distrust and fear that pervaded that world, and his eventual decision to flee to the United States. Within Chapter 4, historical information and other data supplement Ahmad's stories by further contextualizing his experiences, and providing an overview of life in the country at large during these decades.

The present era of Ahmad's history, that of his life in the United States, follows in Chapter 5. Here, I explore his lived experiences of resettlement and perceptions of self, belonging, and this new life. Within this era we come to better understand how Ahmad negotiates his sense of self in this new context, through his emphasis on community, employment and self-sufficiency, legality, and deservingness. As a life history, this era is situated within the social context of his arrival. In particular, I focus on public attitudes, as well as political rhetoric and actions (both before and after the 2016 Presidential election) towards immigration and refugee resettlement using a variety of sources. Within Ahmad's story we come

to better understand the complexities of his belonging within the United States, and his negotiations of self as he aims to assert his place in America.

CHAPTER IV: A HISTORY IN, AND OF, IRAQ

On July 14, 1958, Iraqi military forces flooded the streets of Baghdad, deposed the ruling monarchy, and the Iraqi Republic was born. In the early days of the new republic a pluralist government took form under the direction of military officer come leader 'Abd al-Karim Qasim (Dawisha 2013). But, peace between political factions both inside and outside the country was not to last.

By the time of Ahmad's birth in the capital city four years later, in late 1962, Qasim had proclaimed himself *al-Za'im al-Awhad*, the sole leader of the republic (Dawisha 2013). The tenuous truce between the new Iraqi government and Kurdish leaders had already cracked under the weight of demands for increased Kurdish autonomy and internal conflicts amongst the Kurds, and the previous year had seen the start of the First Iraqi-Kurdish War. Before Ahmad's first birthday, Qasim was removed and summarily executed in a violent military coup orchestrated by members of the Ba'ath Party. Less than nine months later, on November 11, 1963, the Ba'athists were in turn stripped of their power in another military coup, under the direction of President 'Abd al-Salam 'Aref (Dawisha 2013).

Almost 10 years to the day from the July 14 Revolution which had ushered in the existence of the Iraqi Republic, the country experienced its seventh proclaimed military coup. Ahmad was five years old. While three of these previous attempts had been unsuccessful, the events of July 17, 1968 heralded a Ba'athist regime that would ultimately give rise to the 35 year reign of President Saddam Hussein, its eventual upheaval in 2003, and an unabating wave of sectarian violence that followed (Dawisha 2013). The conflicts that embroiled Iraq from its inception forward would cast a dark shadow into the future for millions of Iraqis, and cost the lives of millions of others. As a child, Ahmad was unaware, or perhaps unconcerned, with the political maneuvering and armed disputes that had brought forth the fledgling homeland that he knew. Even so, the shifting—and at times, seeming disintegration—of life-worlds that these

events brought forth would come to inform his future path across international borders, and his understanding of self within these worlds. These morphing versions of self and life-worlds are far beyond what a five-year old Ahmad could ever have imagined.

This is not a tale of war, but the story of a life. Nonetheless our circumstances, and moreover our perceptions of our worlds, ourselves, and our relationships to others, are informed by and brought into being within the social experiences of the past and present. Imagine the life-world as the horizon of all our experiences, the canvas upon which all things appear as themselves and meaningful. It takes shape and form in the narratives we fashion about ourselves and others and where and with whom we belong (Husserl 1936/1970:108-109). And Ahmad, like others of his generation and those that came after, was born into a world of unrelenting political turmoil and hostilities that steered his narrative and his very sense of *being* within the world in ways that are inextricably interwoven with the history of Iraq.

Tasked with sharing our life histories, many of us would likely thread together a tale punctuated by our own personal milestones and accomplishments. In sharing his story, however, Ahmad plots a narrative almost entirely parallel to the events of Iraqi history. Heavy repetition of key historical events and their corresponding dates clearly delineate the five *eras* of his life, consolidating chunks of time into overarching chapters starting from the 1970s. In his retelling, Ahmad often casts himself as a minor character, made relevant only as a witness to key socio-historical events. It is often the granular, the idiographic, that reveals to us the complexities of history. And Ahmad's story, who he is and what he has experienced, is perhaps not *the* story, but is very much *a* story of Iraqi history.

It is also, unavoidably, a story of the United States. America, a nation of immigrants promising a new world and a new life to the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free,"⁵ and

⁵ From the poem "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus (1883/2002) inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty in Upper New York Bay, New York, USA.

yet, replete with its own precarities for those who find themselves upon its shores. The present era of Ahmad's history, found in Part II, is that of resettlement, and begins in 2015 with his arrival to the United States. To understand his changing perceptions and experiences across time and space, I briefly explore each era of his life within this history, beginning with his experiences in Iraq here. But, as a 'targeted' life history, it is his present era on which much of my attention, and discussion, will focus.

Ahmad's narrative lights-up a particular experience of refugeehood, and the experience of resettlement in America. It also helps us see the morphing shape of life-worlds and accompanying shifts in self and identity that inevitably occur along this sustained journey to sanctuary. And, through his experiences, we can also perhaps come to better understand this land of the "Mother of Exiles," and its influence on those newcomers who seek to make it home.

Ahmad arrived in the United States approximately three and a half years before our introduction. He first contacted me via email in January 2019: "I am ready to talk to you about my story," he wrote. Four days, two emails, and several telephone calls later, I was sitting at one end of the large, pristine beige sofa in his living room. A small, portable serving table was placed in front of me. On top sat a seemingly bottomless cup of Iraqi tea, and a large plate of pastries, which I nibbled at his insistence. After small talk and introductions, I turned on the audio recorder. He began,

My generation lived a very difficult life back home. The government there [was] involved in so many conflicts, and so many wars. And we, our generation, paid for that. We paid for that [with] the years, and different things they were supposed to do, or to have. It kills your dreams. It postpones your life. You'll get killed at any time. T'was filled with tears, with sorrow, with fear. And these wars lasted a long time.

Origins and Early Years

Ahmad was born to a “Sunni, Arab, Muslim family” as he tells me during our first interview. “When I was born, I was born as my family was. I found myself like that,” he laughs. “It’s something I did not choose.” Like his father, Ahmad was born and raised in Baghdad; his mother was born approximately 100 miles outside the capital. He explains to me in one of our last interviews that his parents are of the same tribe, distant cousins by some relation “maybe hundreds of years” back in history. With time, and perhaps a pen and paper, I have the sense that Ahmad could possibly chart this history backwards to find their overlap. Earlier in this particular conversation, as he tells me about the role of the tribe and family in Iraqi society, he gives me his ‘full’ name. Counting on his fingers, he rattles off the names given to him from his father, his grandfather, his grandfather’s father, and so on. He continues until his hands display eight outstretched fingers.

His maternal grandfather held high esteem as the “main chief of our tribe in the Arab lands,” a title that was passed to his mother’s eldest brother after his grandfather’s death. His father was, in his words, “well known” and also a tribal chief, though of a lesser status than his mothers’ family. The prestige of his uncle’s position within the tribe, and thus in the country at large, seems considerable. “This is him,” he says, showing me a photo slideshow on his iPhone. “This is the Parliamentary Speaker, he’s visiting him.” The next photo shows the same man, standing alongside a man in military uniform. “Yeah, army leaders. Making visits, visiting him. That’s the way it goes there.”

Ahmad was the third born, and third boy, of a total of eleven children. Two of his siblings died early in life, one from disease and one in a car accident. “But we remained nine: seven boys and two sisters,” he explains. He states that his parents were similar to many others around the world: focused on raising their children, “wanting the best for them,” and with a

conscientious focus on education. “My father was not a rich man,” he says, “but we were living in a wealthy area. Big house, about one acre, eight bedrooms, four bathrooms. Big garden.”

Despite his family’s presumed status, by Ahmad’s accounts his childhood was not extraordinary. In fact, he makes no mention of his upbringing or his family lineage until long after our first meeting, when I ask explicitly about his family of origin. Rather than intentional omissions, it instead seems he has come to deem such details as largely irrelevant to his story as a newcomer in the United States, and a past that he can only make sense of in parallel to the political and war-time history of his homeland. His response to my question highlights this point: “The family, there were two parts,” he replied. “The family, and the government. I grew up in these, there was no conflict between the two. The role of the government was clear in these years.”

A key part of growing up ‘with the government’ for Ahmad was time spent at what he describes as local youth centers. Run by the Ba’athist government and open to both males and females, such centers provided free youth programming. Activities included instruction and practice in a variety of hobbies, tutoring, entertainment, and social activities. He recalls that sometimes they would use a projector to watch films or go on camping trips.

Participation also came with a uniform requirement for the children in attendance. Ahmad lists the varying colors, and their corresponding age levels, or ranks, and describes them as strikingly similar to military attire. And indeed, army training was an important part of the program. Ahmad describes the students, “moving in groups, chanting for the country,” as capturing the zeitgeist of 1970’s Iraq. Camping trips included activities and entertainment, but also required children to rise early and “do the exercises” as part of their training. By high school, teenagers were provided firearms for training by military personnel. While for a young Ahmad these were happy times, he now understands these experiences in a different way:

When the kid goes there he feels so happy. Meanwhile, they were teaching the kids how to defend the country. How to be ready to sacrifice

for the country... We loved it so much. But the goal was to prepare the people to love the situation. We never think about multiple choices, we only think about one choice. We have one leader, chant for one leader... It's all the time racing inside you. War, war, war, war.

Though President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr served as figurehead for the new government installed in the July 1968 coup, it was Saddam Hussein who drove much of Iraqi government policy in the following decade, as he served as Vice President. Hussein's penchant for surveillance and cruelty to thwart opposition was well exercised and known, even before he ascended to the Presidency. But, his desire to consolidate and maintain power in these early years did provide considerable benefits for the country, and to those citizens who did not find themselves the target of his wrath (Dawisha 2013; see also Marr 2012).

National development and improvement projects spearheaded by Hussein, starting in 1972, aimed to raise the standard of living. A key focus for the Vice President was education, which was encouraged through legislation that provided free schooling, up to and including doctoral degrees. Between 1973 and 1980, the number of students enrolled in both secondary schools and universities nearly doubled. While Ahmad's mother was illiterate and his father never finished his studies, he states they were "careful" about their children's studying and school attendance. Encouraged by their parents and provided for by the government, Ahmad and his siblings each completed secondary school, as well as post-secondary education.

Utilizing a substantial increase in the country's oil income, Hussein also set his eyes on other development projects, bringing what Dawisha (2013:220) described as an "unparalleled prosperity to Iraq by the end of the decade." The incentivization of private enterprise in Iraq resulted in a larger, and more affluent Iraqi middle class, of which Ahmad's family was a part. Hussein also enacted policies aimed to raise the standard of living for Iraq's poor; new legislation provided minimum wages, social security, pensions, and projects aimed at providing modern housing for those living in substandard homes. Infrastructural improvements provided

more access to better health facilities free of charge, and considerable improvements and expansion of access to electricity.

Hussein's intentions, of course, were not altruistic but rather aimed at promoting the stability of the regime and winning over its citizens. Regardless, these social improvements, and considerable propaganda reminding Iraqis to whom they owed their thanks, improved quality of life for many and fostered a collective satisfaction with Hussein's regime. The advancements of these early years were formative to Ahmad's understanding of self and world. He asserts that, in many ways, life in 1970's Iraq was much like that in the West of the time. "Just like here," the cities were "very open, very educated." He sometimes speaks wistfully of these years, of a former life filled with social occasions and well-dressed men and women packing stadiums for football games. Women wore miniskirts rather than hijab. Young people in the cities followed the latest fashion trends out of Paris. The possibilities of these early years, the ways of being and social world they seemingly brought into existence, provided for Ahmad a meaningful point of reference for making sense of his later experiences.

Ahmad's sense of self and corresponding identities developed in tandem with what he perceived as a vibrant community within a thriving, cosmopolitan nation. His interactions with family, tribe, and community imbued his life with a sense of value, belonging, and expectation. His many encounters with the government and its satisfied citizens signaled an auspicious future for the state, and for him as a loyal citizen. His encounters in the classroom, during extracurricular activities, and at social events only confirmed this sense of promise. And though the guiding (albeit heavy) hand of the regime maintained a key presence in the lives of young Iraqis and the citizenry at large, he describes these years as ones that provided a sense of stability and satisfaction. He understood who he was, and how and where he fit in this social and spatial world.

"Everything was available," he explains during one of our later interviews. "But, it's the freedom... You need to free your mind. We were created to be free. To be able to breathe. To

be able to think.” As reconstructed in the present, Ahmad sometimes seems to struggle to reconcile the perceived ‘normalcy’ of his adolescence with his subsequent experiences, and the authoritarian regime that shaped his life-course. But scrutiny of the government, and its potent role in shaping his existence did not factor into his perceptions at the time. Our short discussions of these early years, juxtaposed to his overarching narrative, suggest that the perceived normalcy of this period has been largely overshadowed by the tragedies of those that followed; only in hindsight have these times melded with those that followed into a singular, protracted experience of living through war, devastation, and loss. We will keep in mind, as we proceed, that in the springtime of youth, Ahmad’s expectations for himself and his country were confidently optimistic.

“The First Era is War”

In 2019, four years after fleeing Iraq for resettlement in the United States, Ahmad speaks of the early decades of his life as ones marked by the experience of living in a country engaged in near on-going strife. “The first era,” he proclaimed, “is war.” Only four years after their 1970 truce, major fighting had resumed between Iraq and Kurdish forces. It was the second such conflict between the two groups in Ahmad’s eleven years of life. In our first interview, he sketches the plotlines of his history beginning here, with the “war of the seventies.” While the Iraqi Army quickly extinguished the Kurdish forces, winning the Second Iraqi-Kurdish War by mid-1975, all that Ahmad seems to recall of this conflict is the immense loss of Iraqi lives that came as a result. And then, he says simply, “September 23rd, 1980, a war with Iran started.”

In 1979, the revolution in neighboring Iran had displaced the former monarchy with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a predominant political and religious figure for Shia Muslims who became the first Supreme Leader of the new Islamic Republic. Later the same year, Vice President Saddam Hussein ousted Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr to become the new President of Iraq. While both countries were, and remain, home to a majority Shia population, many positions

of power within Iraq in this period were held by those of the minority Sunni sect. Despite this, Ahmad, himself Sunni, describes the government of this time as a secular one. He recalls that their local political leader in the 1970s was Christian and that Christians, along with Muslims and adherents of other religions often rose to “high positions, like representatives of the provinces.” Historians largely seem to agree with this assessment (see Dawisha 2013; Marr 2012). For Al-Bakr and Hussein, themselves cousins and both with origins in Tikrit (a majority Sunni territory), consolidating power amongst regime loyalists appeared to take precedence over religious affiliation. Regardless, these political transitions in Iraq and Iran propelled a wave of sectarian tensions between the two countries that set the course for a new decade of war.

The beginning of the Iran-Iraq war coincided with the beginning of what was supposed to be Ahmad’s final year of secondary studies. As Ahmad explains it, the Iraqi educational system requires the completion of a baccalaureate examination to assess students at the end of elementary, middle, and secondary education. These tests are used as a tracking mechanism, sorting students into various available educational trajectories. In the final year of secondary studies, the baccalaureate exam is used to determine eligibility for higher education programs and universities. “I was so good at school, I was so good,” he tells me. But, the situation at the time made his role as a student challenging. With chagrin he explains,

There was no electricity... [we were] studying with the light of candles, or we go to the street where there's a light and we sit down. It was a very difficult time. All of the students, we gathered there and we read. We were living a very difficult situation. That's why my scores... I could not make a good score. I was so confused, and everybody was talking about the war... I could not read. It was so difficult for me to read, and to be prepared for the examination, so I did not score high. I repeated the year in 1981. I did the exam the next year, and I couldn't make a good scores.

He continues,

Our society is a tribal society. You have relatives, it's not like here. Your relatives, you can count them one... two... three... four... five. Or maybe, there will not be 10. We had tribes there, hundreds you have. When someone dies from your tribe, the whole tribe will be worried. Will be joining the ceremony, will be joining the burial. It's complicated. So we were living the situation. It was so hard for me to sit, to take a corner and to study, and there was bombing on the city.

In 1981, Ahmad re-entered his final year of secondary education, attempting to retake the exam and fare well enough to enter university. However, his attempts to study, and thus his baccalaureate scores, still suffered due to the ongoing war. Unable to enter university he turned his sights to study at an institute (comparable to community college in the United States) and pursued an associate's degree in management. At the time, he was certain the war would be over before he graduated from the institute. "It's crazy!" he exclaims. "The war will not be there after two years. And I [went] three years [to the community college]. I said, 'The war will be ended, any minute.'"

But by 1984, what President Hussein had presumed would be a 'quick' invasion and overthrow of Iran's Shi'ite government was dragging into its fourth year, and Ahmad was completing his studies and preparing for compulsory military service. Though the war with Iran was only one of many episodes of Iraqi bloodshed in his then 22 years of life, it appears to be Ahmad's first experiential encounter with its existential realities. Despite the nearly forty years that have passed since, the anguish in his voice when he speaks about the death of his brother in the war is still palpable.

My brother was killed in the Iran war, the second [oldest] brother. He left a wife and a girl; his daughter was 6 months. He was a friend, he was not only a brother. He was a friend. And we lived different situations together... Even when I was in difficult time in the army and there was an

attack against our unit, or in difficult situation... I look [and] someone is just hitting my back. And I look, 'Ah, it's my brother.' So we were together in situations. We were more to be friends when we were kids. When he was killed in the war, I was hurt inside of me. I was thinking about him all the time.

These experiences of devastation and loss, triggered by his government, were no doubt jarring for a young, educated man of relative privilege who foresaw a future of possibilities as a loyal citizen of a growing and prospering nation. Ahmad puts the experiences and repercussions of the Iran-Iraq war in these words,

I'm not talking about who was the reason for that war. But we paid for that. We were led, my whole generation, we were sent to the war and to the warland. I spent [a] long time in the warland. That war ends on August 8, 1988. I was there, in one of the front lands to the south of the country. After 40 years now, we don't care who started that war. What we think about [are] the results. And that war lasted 8 years. Millions of Iraqis were killed. Thousands of hectares of agricultural lands were destroyed. Millions of dollars, billions of dollars were just spent for the war. So that war, that war was so tough.

Fattah (2008:223) asserts that the Iran-Iraq War was not only "the longest and costliest war ever fought between two countries," but also one "without a winner." While the resolution of the eight years' conflict was in effect a draw brokered by the United Nations, many Iraqis greeted its end with celebration and a renewed sense of patriotism, largely the result of a heavily stylized propaganda campaign (Marr 2013; Holden 2012). But, the costs of the conflict were immense, leaving Iraq with depleted reserves and over \$80 billion in debt (Marr 2013:230). The oil industry that fueled developmental and infrastructural projects less than ten years earlier, and improved the lives of so many Iraqis, was nearly levelled in the early years of the

conflict. Absent this commercial engine, the country's economic well-being was substantially impaired. With the country bankrupt from massive military debt and its infrastructure damaged, President Hussein turned to neighboring Kuwait to repair the country's wounded economy and his pride (Dawisha 2013:223).

On August 2, 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait in what would become known in the United States as the First Gulf War. Ahmad was still in military service. By the following year an international coalition, including the United States, had joined the clash, and on January 17 the early morning sky above Baghdad and other targeted areas exploded as the first air raids began (Marr 2013:195). Ahmad was able to escape the frontlines and serve in Baghdad due to his father's connections. But, there was still little relief to be found anywhere in the midst of this new war, and its devastation was immense. Ahmad explains,

Every day, maybe four - maybe twenty-four hours, there is bombing on the houses, on the electricity stations, on bridges... And sometimes, they hit the people. Everything was destroyed inside Baghdad, and inside the bombing was everywhere... So many industries were destroyed. In Baghdad we have about 18 bridges. Baghdad is [a] beautiful city, the [Tigris] river is inside. They destroyed most of the bridges...

The war quickly ended, with Iraqi forces being driven from Kuwait by February 28, 1991. But Hussein, determined to squash the escalating insurrectionists in the country, quickly pivoted his troops towards the Shi'ites to the south and the Kurds in the north, exacting revenge on both groups (Dawisha 2013). Tens of thousands, including civilians, were killed while millions more fled the country. Enforcement of a United Nations sanctioned no-fly zone by American, British, and French forces began soon after in an effort to shield the northern Kurdish territories from Hussein's wrath in the Anfal campaigns (see The Associated Press 1998). By August 1992 the zone was extended, offering some level of protection to the Shi'ite's to the south as well (see

BBC News 1998). Despite the brevity of the major combat operations of the First Gulf War by the international coalition, the devastation from years of war was staggering.

Ahmad recalls that between three and four million lost their lives as the result of the war with Iran and the First Gulf War.⁶ Though his estimate is quite high compared to both official reports and independent researchers, the loss of life was nonetheless immense. For Ahmad, many were personal. Along with his brother, he lost countless friends, cousins, and uncles as a result of these conflicts.

While Ahmad often mentions the loss of life, and frequently fixates on the destruction of infrastructure as he describes these conflicts (and those that followed), for him and others of his generation, the wars' devastation extended far beyond physical damage and the casualties of conflict. He speaks of this time with the sorrowful nostalgia of a young man and possible futures never to be realized. "I lost my life then," he says, "I served there for more than nine years, in two wars. For nothing." His narration of this time is a story of loss: loss of time, dreams, and opportunity; loss of relationships and loved ones; the experiential loss of a possible life and anticipated self in a not-so-distant future. As if recalling his potent word, "warland," he explains,

The whole situation, when you fight the whole world no place is safe, right? And we were part of that. You can't imagine you are living in a country fighting the whole world. So. you are living the same situation [as] in the Iran war. All that was continuous for me. I was living in [the] same situation in 1992 when our army was defeated from Kuwait.

⁶ Estimates of casualties for the Iran-Iraq War vary widely. Dawisha (2013) and Marr (2013) cite approximately half a million casualties. The Iraqi government officials place the death toll at approximately half that. Kurzman (2013) argues that while some researchers estimate as many as 500,000 Iraqis were killed in the conflict, casualties of this number would be apparent in analysis of the Iraqi Census; however, his analysis suggested the casualties were likely considerably lower. Iraqi casualty estimates vary for the First Gulf War as well, though typically range at approximately 20,000 military deaths (Keaney and Cohen 2003).

So, we... I... I lost brothers, I lost friends in the war. And the dearest of friends. You can imagine, this period from '84 to the middle of '92, it's [a] long time, right? I spent it just like that. They call it serving the country. So you serve the country with your blood, but the country's giving you nothing in return. You lost the most important 10 years in your life. And that's what has happened with me. Twenty-two to thirty-one, about that time. The most beautiful period in our lives, and you lost the dearest people to your heart. The war affected us.

Unsurprisingly, these wars affected Ahmad deeply. Beyond the evident trauma of living through and serving in years of wartime, these experiences set in motion the dismantling of Ahmad's naivety of the glory of his homeland, its government, his understandings of self and place in this world. Under the pressure of the subsequent eras, each bearing their own tragedies, his optimism for the future of his country and his own future within its bounds would ultimately shatter, spurring his eventual decision to flee Iraq.

Survival and Suffocation Under Embargo

After the First Gulf War, Ahmad explains, came the embargo. "The first era is war. Then the [next] is to be under international embargo. International. No one dares to buy or sell." The next 12 years would only further postpone, and eventually disintegrate, the future that Ahmad had envisioned as a young man. Iraq's economic despair, now further crippled by international sanctions and a subsequent humanitarian crisis, provided limited opportunity to rework those prior conceptions of self and his future into his current existence. This world under embargo was one of radically inhibited choice and prospects, and quickly disintegrating social relationships which, in effect, repressed many possible ways of existing in the world he remembered from his youth. Though Ahmad did his best to move forward this new reality, in a country stagnated by international sanctions the life he had imagined was, again, put on hold.

Four days after Hussein's invasion and occupation of Kuwait began, on August 6, 1990, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 661, admonishing Hussein and calling for the restoration of Kuwait's "sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity" (UN Security Council 1990). Moreover, the resolution also called upon all member states to prevent "the import into their territories of all commodities and products originating in Iraq," as well as "the sale or supply... of any commodities or products... for the purposes of any business" conducted in the country, and the prohibition of economic support to Iraqi businesses or government entities. The only exceptions provided for in the resolution were those for needs explicitly for medical and humanitarian purposes. In a matter of months, 90 percent of the country's imports and greater than 97 percent of Iraq's exports had ceased (Marr 2013:195). Before coalition forces even entered the fray, in September of the same year, the Iraqi government was forced to begin rationing.

While the February 1991 cease-fire ended the war, it did not end the trade embargo. United Nations Resolution 687, passed after the cease-fire on April 12, allowed for food imports and other essential needs (with Security Council approval), but required the government to fulfill its requirements for the embargo to be lifted, including elimination of weapons of mass destruction; subsequent resolutions also required reparations to Kuwait for losses incurred as a result of the invasion (see UN Security Council 1991). The international sanctions against Iraq would drag into the next decade, creating a visceral misery among Iraqi citizens few could have imagined.

While much of the world had been quick to step in on Kuwait's behalf, Ahmad often wonders why the United States led-coalition forces chose not to disable Hussein's regime in the days that followed: "This is a question. We, the Iraqis, we paid for that. Why are you not serious in '91? Why did you not collapse the government at that time?" Ahmad contends that, in many ways, the international response only exacerbated the devastation of the rattled Iraqis left to piece the war-torn country back together. In effect, the imposed sanctions only left those in the

country gasping for subsistence, under an authoritarian leader that refused to concede Iraq's losses to save its citizens.

Thinking about the damaged infrastructure, Ahmad recalls, "everything was rebuilt in about six months," by the Iraqis themselves. Recent college graduates were recruited into newly developed, or re-developing industries aimed at meeting the needs of the country under embargo. He credits the Iraqi people, rather than the government, with the rebuilding of the country after the years of war. "You can't imagine how smart the Iraqi people are. Saddam was using the Iraqi people to [re]build Iraq," he declares with pride during one of our later conversations. His narrative of this era is marked with early tales of Iraqi resilience, but despite these initial improvements, life in the country remained one of struggle, sacrifice, and survival under the years of economic sanctions.

By 1992 the average income in the country had dropped to less than a third of its level at the end of the Iraq-Iran war, and the value of the Iraqi dinar crumbled in the face of overwhelming inflation.⁷ Ahmad describes seeing teachers, and even university professors supplementing their shrinking salaries with other work. "When he finishes his day, he works as a taxi driver, or he works in a grocery store to get some money." Limited employment opportunities combined with skyrocketing inflation restricted possibilities for upward mobility, and standards of living for many dropped to bare subsistence levels.

That same year Ahmad was released from military service. But returning to the morphing forlorn civilian world and building a life after his extended service proved challenging. Reflecting on this time in his life, Ahmad asks rhetorically, "Okay, you are free. Where to go... what do you think you can do? You can't do anything." Despite his schooling, after the loss of nearly nine years of life, experience, and opportunity while in the Iraqi Army, Ahmad faced considerable

⁷ Prior to the Iraq-Iran War, the dinar had been equivalent to approximately \$3.20; by 1996 \$1 was worth 2,600 dinar (Marr 2013:208).

challenges in charting a path forward that aligned with the anticipated self and future of his youth. With little in the way of viable options, Ahmad turned to his family, and acquiesced to work in his father's business. He explains,

There were no businesses, and the situation was so hard. You can't get your living. When I start working with my father... I never work[ed] with my father before, [but] my brothers used to do that, especially my younger brothers. When I went there, I was so depressed at that time. My father said, 'Why are you worried? Come and work with me.' I said, 'Okay.' This is the only thing I have at this time, this embargo. So, I said okay. My brothers are with you, he said that's fine, you learn. So, I learned.

In a tangible way Ahmad is connecting his self to the idea of embargo. Imposing this official ban on his country also imposed a ban on Ahmad, proscribing what he could be, what he could do. The restrictions on material goods and financial support threw national development, and in many ways life itself, into reverse. "The situation took us maybe decades backward," Ahmad asserts. The international sanctions gravely impaired the educational system, and literacy rates plummeted. Ahmad and other Iraqis continued to receive food rations, which allowed each member of the family to receive subsidized staple food items. He remembers that these rations provided "enough for the family to survive," with some larger families receiving enough to sell excess on the black market for needed cash. But, the burgeoning middle class of the 1970's was quickly dwindling, with no substantive path to stave off downward mobility (Marr 2013:209).

As a result, Iraq suffered a "hemorrhage of its educated and technocratic elite" during the embargo era (Marr 2013:208). Many Iraqis had fled in the years leading up to the First Gulf War, but by the mid-1990's between two and three million Iraqis were thought to be living outside the country, largely concentrated in neighboring Iran, Syria, and Jordan (Marr

2013:219). Ahmad himself considered leaving due to the challenges of an embargoed life. “I planned to escape at that time, in the 90’s. To escape the country,” he explains. “My father stopped me at that time actually. He said, ‘Where do you want to go? Only Jordan.’”

Ahmad’s father was able to persuade him to remain in Iraq, arguing that conditions would soon improve, and that they had little recourse given the declining status of the country and its citizens in the global realm. As he came to existential grips with this situation, Ahmad struggles with the troubling realization that “nobody wants you.” Moreover, obtaining the necessary documentation from the Iraqi government to emigrate was cost prohibitive. “There was big money, if you want to leave, that you need to pay at that time... half million. It was nothing if you compare it to dollars, but people don’t have money.” Eventually he conceded to remain in Iraq due to, in large part, a lack of possible alternatives. Ahmad plodded forward the best he could. In 1995 he married, and the following year he and his wife welcomed their first daughter.

Pellett (2003:186) argues that, as a result of the sanctions “the population moved from the edge of the first-world status to poor, third world status with staggering speed.” While some of the most pressing, basic issues related to infrastructure and industry were quickly mitigated, these efforts had largely focused on providing a minimum for survival. The government supplied rations staved off mass starvation for the population at large, but many of Iraq’s most vulnerable were still profoundly affected.

Electricity, while available, was limited. Lack of access to parts and chemicals needed for filtration systems meant many Iraqis did not have access to clean drinking water. And though the United Nations had attempted to put in place a “Food for Oil” program as early as 1991, Hussein refused for nearly five years, and the first shipments from the program didn’t reach the country until March 1997 (Marr 2013:208). Years of scarcity of both food and medical needs, compounded and proved detrimental to the health of the population. Infant mortality increased.

Health services were crippled (Marr 2013:208). Oftentimes, there simply was no medicine available, even to treat common conditions. Ahmad recalls,

I don't know how many hundreds of thousands of kids passed away because of the shortage of medicine and the shortage of food... You have [a] sick person in your family and diseases here and there, yes. There were good doctors, but sometimes there's no medicine for this kind of disease. Most of the diseases were hitting kids. And because of the number and the kind of weapons that [had] been used in these wars... so, so many deformed children. Newborn children were deformed in very, very awful ways. That's why [with] the newborn kids [if] someone is good, you will be so happy. It was difficult.

As the embargo crawled on, opposition from the global community and consensus of the increasing humanitarian crisis in Iraq grew. Zaidi and Smith-Fawzi (1995) initially argued that sanctions in Iraq were responsible for nearly 600,000 deaths in the country. This figure was subsequently brought into question by other researchers (see Lopez and Cortright 1998), and later by Zaidi (see Zaidi 1997), in part due to concerns of the legitimacy of government records provided. Later research produced lower figures, such as a 1999 report estimated that between 1991 and 1998 there were 227,000 excess deaths amongst children under the age of five in the country (see Garfield 1999). Nonetheless, the loss of life and other devastating health effects of the sanctions, such as malnutrition, were vast and well documented. Even Hussein's eventual agreement to participate in the Food for Oil program seemed to do little to minimize the suffering of Iraqis.

Some suggested that Hussein attempted to capitalize on, and even exacerbated, the challenges faced by Iraq's most vulnerable during the embargo era to prompt international outcry. In 2000, then United States Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, argued that Hussein's long-standing resistance to the Food for Oil program was due to his desire "to use his

people's suffering to mobilize public opposition to the sanctions," and that the resources it made available were not being used as intended to alleviate the suffering of everyday Iraqis (Albright 2000). Ahmad also points to the role of the government in the struggles of this era,

The government at that time, with all these difficulties... It's not about the people's safety, more the safety of the system and the regime. They know there will be opposition. And so many people will try to do something to refuse the situation. So, they were just catching the country with an iron fist.

In 1998, the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, Denis Halliday, publicly resigned only one year into his tenure in the post, in protest of the sanctions. He had previously served with the United Nations for 30 years (Holden 2012). Approximately one week after his resignation, on October 6, 1998, Halliday gave a speech to the United States Congress in which he forcefully argued that the sanctions were "a counterproductive, bankrupt concept that has led to unacceptable human suffering," pointing to its detrimental effects on Iraqi lives, society, and the psyches those struggling under life in embargo.

Along with the direct loss of life, Halliday (1998) argued that the restrictions had resulted in increased poverty, homelessness, prostitution, and street-crime (often by children aiming to help support their families) and decreased educational attainment. Moreover, they were disintegrating the bonds, values, expectations, and relationships that created social cohesion, particularly within the traditional Iraqi extended family. The sanctions, Halliday (1998) contended, forced the Iraqi people to "live with humiliation," and "encourage[d] isolation, alienation, and fanaticism." He noted that an air of "hopelessness and depression" hung over the nation, and that those with the resources to escape were doing so, contributing to a "brain drain" in the country (Halliday 1998). In essence, while doing little to prompt Hussein's cooperation, the embargo was degrading the very fabric of Iraqi society itself, leaving little

positive remnants with which the Iraqi people could reconfigure their ways of existence to a new reality.

In light of the events of Iraqi history that followed this speech, and conversations with Ahmad, it seems that Halliday's criticisms of the true cost of the international sanctions were largely accurate. While Ahmad did not personally experience some of these deleterious effects, Halliday's poignant assessment of the mood within the country, the embargo's effects on the minds and selves of the Iraqis under sanctions, closely overlaps with Ahmad's descriptions of this era. Ahmad understood that the sanctions "ke[pt] the people living in suffering," with little effect on the regime. "The people were hurting, not the government," he laments.

In the late 1990s, he began occasional work as a driver and translator for an international press team reporting in the country. This work expanded Ahmad's view of the human suffering in Iraq. He repeatedly describes the embargoed life as "difficult" and oppressive. He frequently alludes to feelings of anger, frustration, and a sense of 'being stuck' with little option to escape. "We were under that embargo for 12 years," Ahmad sighs. "We can't leave. It's difficult to stay... We were just like, suffocated inside.

The conditions in Iraq isolated the country from the global community but also isolated many Iraqis from the world, and from each other. Along with national development, the international sanctions also inhibited social interactions and encounters that promoted social cohesion, and with it existent and possible relationships in communities. The repercussions of communicating political dissent and limited capacity to escape and create a new life elsewhere, provided little alternative possibilities to reconceive oneself and existence in a meaningful way within this world. The constraints on ways of being, on recreating a sense of existence with purpose, in maintaining a sense of continuity in oneself and prior aspirations, were stifling. For Ahmad and likely others of his generation, the embargo era was not only one of international sanctions against Iraq, but one that also embargoed an anticipated self and imagined future.

“At Last”

In 1998, the United States Congress voted the Iraq Liberation Act into law stating, in part, that it “should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power.” As part of the legislation, approximately \$100 million was earmarked for support to opposition groups, with the intent of “promot[ing] the emergence of a democratic government” in Iraq (Holden 2012:287). The September 11th terrorist attacks in the United States three years later, and the subsequent declaration of a “war on terror” by United States President George W. Bush was used to further legitimize an escalation against the regime (Holden 2012:300). Two years later, on March 19, 2003, United States President George W. Bush addressed America, announcing that American-led coalition forces were preparing to “disarm Iraq, to free its people, and to defend the world from grave danger” (Bush 2003a). The following day the US began its first airstrikes in the country.

Several months prior, Ahmad found work with another international press agency and began working again as a driver and interpreter. But his new employer provided him the opportunity to grow his journalistic skills, and to also expanded his view of the ‘situation’ of Iraq. He explains,

In 2003, before the war, I started with [my employer]. At that time the country was not open to be a journalist, to work. It was not free. So, I started with that, and I worked with international, and experienced journalists. Because at that time, only the craziest journalists come to Iraq because of the regime. We started that before the war, and we did some crazy reports. But I worked with maybe the greatest journalist I have faced. I kept on in 2003, at the beginning with them, and then at the war time.

As a citizen of Baghdad and part of a news crew covering the events of the country, Ahmad saw firsthand the devastation of the embargo followed by the destruction wrought by the latest round of warfare. As a member of the press, he witnessed their effects firsthand, frequently encountered the tragic tales of others, and saw increasing evidence of governmental violence and corruption. These experiences further expanded Ahmad's horizon of experience and validated the perceptive framework through which he understood his homeland, and his life within it. Years of struggle at the hands of the government were about to come to a head. And Ahmad was ready.

The conflict between the Iraqi regime and the US-led coalition forces was short-lived, and by April, the tide finally seemed to be turning for those who had lived through decades of conflict only to be suffocated under the economic sanctions of the embargo. By April 9 of the same year, coalition forces had taken Baghdad; other major Iraqi cities fell in the following days (Marr 2012:226). Four days later, on April 13, 2003, the prominent statue of Saddam Hussein tumbled from its grand pedestal in Firdaus Square, downtown Baghdad. The event was televised around the world.

Video from The Associated Press and CBS News show throngs of smiling and cheering Iraqis crowding the square, escorted by the tanks of the US military.⁸ At least one young man can be seen using a sledgehammer to batter the statue's pedestal. Later, a United States service member scales the statue, securing a rope around the statue's neck, and covering the face with an American flag; a young Iraqi man waves an American flag in his hands in another part of the square. An Iraqi flag is later handed to the US soldier, which replaces the American

⁸ See AP Archive. 2015. "Saddam Hussein Statue and Pictures Destroyed, Mohammed Al-Sahhaf, Looting." YouTube. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd-M3Y-lprU>; CBS News. 2013. "April 9, 2003: Saddam Hussein's Statue Falls." YouTube. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1PPNfGVW0s>.

flag. Eventually, aided by the rope attached to a US military tank, the state slowly tumbles sideways as the cheers of those in the square grow louder.

As a member of the press, Ahmad's sense of the day was informed not only by his personal feelings but covering the collective sigh of relief and renewed hopefulness of those in the square that day. He recalls,

We went there, and we took so many pictures. The people who were there, most of them were young people. And those people were so happy. When the statue went to the ground, they took their slippers and start[ed] hitting the statue. They were so happy at that time, and they were hoping [for] a lot. A lot... [Saddam Hussein's] period was filled with troubles. So, the people that were living there, they were hoping a lot of things. They want to enjoy their life. And life was so difficult inside. So, people were so happy.

Less than a month later major combat operations ended, and by the end of the year, December 13, Saddam Hussein had been captured and was being held for trial. The following day, United States President George W. Bush declared that "A hopeful day has arrived" (Bush 2003b). With oversight from the coalition forces, the process of creating and installing a new government began.

The conflict may have been short but was still catastrophic. Ahmad remembers that "the war in 2003 was worse than the other wars. Everything was destroyed: electricity stations, water stations, bridges, infrastructure, sewages." While some of the damage was the result of the war itself, Marr (2012) argues that much was, in effect, the result of the chaos that accompanied the ill-planned invasion and occupation. Looting quickly became rampant throughout much of the country, with mobs targeting critical points of infrastructure and suppliers of necessities, and even the antiquities in the Baghdad National Museum (see Dawisha 2013; Marr 2012). "The real

costs of the occupation,” Marr (2012:227) argues, “came immediately after the fall of the regime.”

Despite the devastation and initial uncertainties of the occupation, many Iraqis were elated by the possibilities of a new era in Iraq’s history. Ahmad, like many of those he spoke with in Firdaus Square, believed that these events heralded a turning point for Iraq and their lives within the country. The end of economic sanctions against Iraq, coupled with the removal of Hussein’s oppressive regime, signaled a time for hopefulness and a brighter future for many who had lived through the years of international embargo and national conflict.

“We were so happy in 2003 when the change happened, because we say, ‘At last,’” Ahmad says. “We were so happy with the change.” This optimism continued to carry Ahmad, and many other Iraqis through the following year. On April 13, 2004, Ahmad and his crew returned to the site of the joyous display at the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue one year earlier: “We asked them, ‘You were so happy last year. What about this year?’ [They said], ‘We are still happy. We still hope.’” Ahmad, too, continued to hope for a new future for Iraq, and his family.

But the hopefulness and possibilities of a new existence that seemingly materialized with the removal of Saddam Hussein would soon evaporate. Historians point to the attempted erasure of the Ba’ath party by the Coalition Provisional Authority and the dissolution of the state’s military forces as poorly considered decisions that not only failed to stabilize the reeling country, but further expedited its collapse (Marr 2012:223-227). Ahmad, likewise, asserts the detriment of both decisions in our first interview, and believes they set the stage for the following era of sectarian violence.

With the toppling of the old regime came a call for de-Ba’athification, a policy enacted by the coalition government aimed at terminating the influence of Hussein’s former party. While limiting the power of the party of the ousted dictator seemed outwardly positive, the implications of the policy, from Ahmad’s view, were two-sided. For many Iraqis, he explains, membership

provided access to social networks and institutions that were otherwise unavailable. Ahmad argues,

When you live in the Soviet Union, for sure you are communist. How can you live? How can you study? How can you achieve your goals? If you are not communist, you cannot. You will not be able to. We were the same. There are professors and doctors who are Ba'athist. And they are innocent people, because the country was under [the] control of those people for about 40 years. So, you don't blame them. 'I want to live. I want to be [a] doctor, I want to be [an] officer, I want to be police,' and so on. The Ba'athist people were the educated people in the country.

As Ahmad perceived it, becoming a Ba'athist was, for many, requisite for seeking to better their prospects in education or employment, and was a common thread for those experiencing a higher level of social status. In a country in which one's ways of being and reality of the everyday was mediated, if not controlled, by the government, a position within the party provided one of the few vehicles for bettering one's existence. While Ahmad denies he, or any members of his family, belonged to the Ba'ath Party, he speaks with a sense of affinity for those affected by the 2003 policy, and likely for good reason: he, and many members of his family, seemingly enjoyed an (at least somewhat) privileged status in Iraq, as indicated by details provided in his story signaling class and status. The attempted dissolution of the party following the removal of Saddam Hussein would become, in effect, an attack on the status quo of the country—of which Ahmad and his family were, to at least some degree, a part.

Along with de-Ba'athification came the effective dissolution of the Iraqi Army by the coalition forces. In 2002, Iraqi service members numbered approximately 389,000; by the end of 2003 they had dwindled to only 48,500 (Gollob and O'Hanlon 2020). As a result, Dawisha (2012:243) argues, not only did the first year of the occupation of Iraq create "the initial sparks of insurgency" but it was also a cause "masterminded by Ba'athists and ex-soldiers." with little to

do, and little to left to lose. From Ahmad's perspective, the upending of the social order coupled with decreased physical security in the country quickly resulted in a loss of social cohesion in Iraq, and sealed the fate of his family, and others that would flee in the coming years.

I asked Ahmad several times if there was a specific point, or a certain event, that led to the loss of the hope he had felt in April of 2003. In our conversations it seems there is no definitive experience that signaled the transition from eager anticipation to the anxiety and then the fear that was to come. It appears that the transfer of power to the Iraqi Interim government in June 2004, and the elections that followed, began the slide downward in Ahmad's view. The following year, representatives from different groups within the country were brought together to work towards drafting a constitution, and a series of elections were held. With every round of elections, Ahmad's apprehension increased,

When they start the election... When people looked at the people who were in the process... They figure[d] out that those people are the bad people. They were not giving a chance to the good people, to the educated people, even to join the political process. So, for example, in the elections, the good people nominated people and they were assassinated. So, they were killed... Year by year it was proved to everybody... the democratic process led to the control of bad people. They control the army, they control the police, they control the security forces.

For Ahmad, the possibility to dream of a new life was fleeting, only a quick uptick of optimism in an otherwise often desolate existence of the years prior and those that followed. It is not difficult to see the ways Ahmad's understanding of who he was, and how he should or could live, were experiences akin to the reckless meanderings of a pinball machine. Nonetheless, he continued to grasp for it, for nearly another decade. But by 2005, the pervasive sense of hope and excitement seen in the faces of young Iraqis in Firdaus Square a year earlier, the one that had led Ahmad to exclaim, "At last," was quickly ending.

“There was a Country Called Iraq, Now there is... Nothing”

The final chapter of Ahmad’s story in Iraq spans roughly a decade of experience from 2005 to 2015. “After 2003,” he explains, “you can’t trust your neighbor... Everything was corrupted. In 2005, if you are in another place you may be killed at any minute.” The sectarian violence from 2003 forward has been well documented by news outlets, historians, and other researchers.⁹ While a full exploration of its intricacies and causes is beyond the scope of this thesis, here I provide a broad overview of the swiftly changing political and social contexts following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Ahmad’s stories shape this retelling. It is his understandings, his experiences, that give form and content to this morphing patch of history and reveal his sense of being within this reordered reality. And, finally, we will witness how Ahmad’s sister-in-law’s memories of this turbulent time helped shape his own perceptions and impressions.

Ahmad’s sister-in-law, Maysa, joined his household in 2005 and remains an integral part of his family in the present. As the eldest daughter in her family, the eldest in Ahmad’s household, and the most educated—she earned a doctoral degree and worked as a professor in Iraq—she commands considerable respect and influence within the family. During several visits to their home, she eagerly recounted her own understanding of this era forward. While Ahmad’s experience remains the cornerstone of this life history, Maysa’s accounts further contextualize their world within this era, and highlight the trepidation that existed in nearly every aspect of life. And, as an esteemed member of the household, her perceptions, observations, and experiences imparted their own influence on Ahmad’s understanding of this time.

In our second interview, Ahmad revealed that he was still “dreaming about the bad things,” particularly those occurring in post-2003 Iraq. Many of these stories were recounted not

⁹ See Dawisha 2012; Fattah 2009; and Marr 2012 for more information. The Iraq Index, compiled at regular intervals by the Brookings Institute (from 2003 through 2020) provides statistical data highlighting changes in military and civilian casualties, types of violent attacks in the country, as well as other economic and social indicators. (See Gollob and O’Hanlon.)

as singular points to be plotted on a timeline, but as examples of experiences that informed a pervasive sense of insecurity and fear. While dates have been provided for specific events where available it is important to remember that, for Ahmad, many of these experiences seem unmarked by time—and are instead illustrative of an uninterrupted flow of days stretching into years in which any moment could bear tragedy.

On October 19, 2005, Saddam Hussein's first trial for crimes against humanity began (Marr 2012:256). The following November he was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. On December 30, 2006, the execution was carried out (Fattah 2009:254). By this time, any sense of normalcy, predictability, or order in Ahmad's existential world, along with the homeland he had known, had degraded nearly beyond recognition. It is not a world he would have recognized in the dreams of his youth, or even three years prior as he watched the toppling of Hussein's statue in Firdaus Square. Though a sense of loss and the challenges of living a 'normal life' were palpable in his recounting of his earlier years, the ten years of sectarian conflict Ahmad experienced were, as he describes, "unimaginable." Ahmad's final decade in Iraq was largely one preoccupied with enduring an unforeseeable and incomprehensible world.

Two years earlier, United States Secretary of State Colin Powell admitted that the US-led invasion and occupation resulted in an 'unanticipated' crumbling of the "entire structure of military and civil society" (qtd. in Dawisha 2012:242). In effect, the ramifications of the regime change in Iraq were ones that the West was unprepared and unequipped to remedy. Undeterred, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) charged forward. The CPA acted with little regard for the political power vacuum and denigration of Iraq's social fabric caused by Operation Iraqi Freedom and the ongoing Iraq War (Marr 2012). By June 2004, the CPA's head, Paul Bremer, handed over the responsibilities of rebuilding the flailing state to an interim government (Fattah 2009:253).

The newly liberated nation was left on its own to remake the crippled infrastructure, fledgling government, and fracturing society brought on by the former regime and its inadequate removal. This was no small task. Marr (2012:223) maintains that, while the state had surely suffered under Hussein's regime, the events of 2003 ushered in an "unprecedented political and social collapse" under which the country "soon began to fracture into its ethnic and sectarian components." The loss of solidarity and cohesion, in Ahmad's purview, were the effect of the uncertainty and lack of security in Iraq post-2003:

There was no police to do the job of security. No army to protect the borders. No security forces to do what else needs to be done, to preserve and protect the inside harmony as we call it. No law. What has happened here is that this group thought, "I will protect my people." Each group starts recruiting people from his sector, and that makes a kind of division. So, in spite of all the destruction and destroying everything, there's a kind of destruction inside society.... We were living in harmony with the Christians, Jews, other Muslims. But in a minute, your neighbor who spent [a] long time living together with you, became your enemy. Everything was destroyed.

Fattah (2009) attests these sectarian divisions were the result of the long-standing resentments and histories of different groups within Iraq. And, rather than a catalyst for solidarity, desires to expel the Western intruders at the head of the coalition government only exacerbated long-standing rivalries. In their attempts to seize power, each group "began battling each other, as well as coalition forces, in order to further their own causes" (Fattah 2009:259). In essence, the varying insurgencies were not only revolting against the CPA, and later, the interim government, but ripping apart Iraqi society itself. In the absence of government power and any meaningful security structure, the varying factions vied for their own piece of what remained of the shattered country, often by any means necessary. In our conversations, Ahmad often mourns the way of

life and home that he ultimately lost as a result of the discord and conflict it wrought upon the state and nation.

Ahmad's sense of this era is grounded in both personal experiences and a broader view of life in the country informed by his work: "I was living the situation as [an] Iraqi person, a citizen. And I was looking at the situation and following the situation [with my job]—what's going on here and there by the violence." By 2005, Ahmad was working not only as a journalist but was running the office that produced reports for all of Iraq. "I was in charge of covering the whole country. I had journalists around the country, they were sending [me] reports. It was only violence," he contends. He was not simply confined to a newsroom, however; he often worked in the field, with limited support: "I was doing everything by myself. I was filming, editing, doing the lights, having a camera and computer, carrying my tripod, sometimes driving my own car. It was very tough. But it was a school, a great school."

Some of Ahmad's reports involved working as an embedded reporter with the United States military. From his experience overseeing the press office and his own reporting, he came to see the militia infiltration of the reconstructed Iraqi army as one of the most severe aspects of the United States occupation. As he understands it, many that entered the reconstituted national military were sent by various militia groups and held their loyalties: "They were in the army, but they were not loyal to the country, they were loyal to their leader." While the support of the United States military was well intentioned, in Ahmad's view it only further exacerbated sectarian divisions by providing training and weapons access to militia groups. He elaborates,

I worked with the US army whenever they have operations... to see what they are doing. Sometimes, they train the security forces. But unfortunately, it's not the police that we need. It's the militia men... The [US military] will say, "Okay, we want to train a group of people." They will not check the names. They are dealing with the government, right? But in fact, it's militia who are joining... So now, if you look at the weapons they

are using and the militia in Iraq, you will find it's all American weapons.

Where did they get it from? They were taking it from the Iraq army, that's the irony.

With the increasing social divisions came increasing corruption as different groups vied to secure power and resources. The examples recounted by Ahmad seem unimaginable: "It's so easy if you leave your house, escaping maybe some group, the next day they will make fake papers, and they will sell your house. They will confiscate it." Falsified credentials for skilled professions were available for purchase. "Even fake medical doctors" with "faked papers" began advertising their services, as educated professionals fled the country. He describes bands of thieves emptying hospitals of basic necessities such as mattresses, blood pressure monitoring devices, and syringes.¹⁰ Another time he recalls, "They paved the roads, and two hours later when they finished paving, thieves came" to steal the newly laid pavement.

The corruption, however, was "not only about the money," Ahmad says gravely. The limited security in the country not only enabled corruption, it triggered ineffable violence. "If you walk there, they will sell you. 'I will sell this man to you,' if you are from another sector... No rules, no rules at all... It's a jungle there."

Murders and kidnappings, as well as attacks carried out using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) became regular occurrences. In 2003, over 12,000 Iraqi civilians died from violent acts (Gollob and O'Hanlon 2020).¹¹ While 2004 saw a modest decrease in these numbers, by 2005 the civilian body count had increased to 16,583 (Gollob and O'Hanlon 2020). In Baghdad (as well as some other cities) opposing groups aimed to reclaim neighborhoods by

¹⁰ While the focus of this life history is that of Ahmad's perceptions rather than a substantiation of facts, the account of this time provided by Fattah (2009) confirms some of these statements, such as thefts within medical facilities.

¹¹ In this era, the Iraqi population was roughly 1/10 of that of the United States. In the year 2003, for comparison, just under 50,000 Americans died as a result of violence (CDC 2006).

driving 'outsiders' from their homes with fear and assassinations. Extremist groups began targeting those not adhering to their accepted religious teaching, prompting retribution in the form of more violence (Marr 2012:258). The increasing division and organization amongst insurgent groups would only continue to escalate.

Exacerbated by the bombing of the Askari Mosque in Samarra' on February 22, 2006, the on-going sectarian conflict became, in effect, a civil war "in all but name" and the country, again, a war zone (Fattah 2009:253; also see Marr 2012). Baghdad neighborhoods, already on the cusp of complete sectarian segregation, became battlefields. Mosques, markets, and people became targets. An estimated 700,000 Iraqis fled their homes in the following 12 months, with over 120,000 of the displaced in Baghdad; by mid-2007, over one million Iraqis were facing internal displacement, with the largest percentage of those again in the capital (Dawisha 2012:261). Violent deaths in the country doubled from the previous year.¹² Everyday citizens were forced to make "the choice either to affiliate with a sectarian militia for protection or... to join their respective sectarian community elsewhere in Iraq" (Marr 2012:260).

Many Iraqis left the country altogether. Between 2006 and 2015, approximately 126,000 Iraqis were admitted to the United States for resettlement (Mossaad 2016). Others immigrated to other Western nations. The largest portion of those displaced remained in the region, however, concentrated in neighboring Syria, Jordan, and Iran. In 2006, Ahmad's parents joined the many leaving Iraq. "The family business was confiscated by the other group, with the civil war. All the money, everything was taken by them. My father got [a] heart attack at that time," he explains. Their livelihood gone, Ahmad's parents temporarily fled to Syria.

Ahmad and his family remained in Baghdad. Now a father of four young daughters, the growing precarity led him to take on the role of patriarch for an extended household. With their

¹² Gollob and O'Hanlon (2020) report 29,526 civilian deaths in 2006; Marr (2012) cites United Nations estimates of 34,400 for the year.

father deceased and no husbands of their own, three of his wife's sisters were living with little protection from the escalating violence, much of which was driven by extremist views that were particularly harsh for women. "It became not safe for a woman to drive... to go out. The cities were controlled by religious Islamic parties," he reports. "It became not safe, because they may be kidnapped for money, they may be kidnapped for different reasons. And clashes are everywhere." While many who remained in the country were pulled toward their sectarian identities and communities seeking a sense of safety, Ahmad and his immediate family moved into his wife's family home. He says of this decision,

When a difficulty comes, you want to be together as a family to defend each other, to support each other. That's why we live together in one house... It's a big house. [Her] sisters they have nobody, so I was there with them.

This new extended household included his sister-in-law Maysa. Her stories provide an additional viewpoint of this volatile world, as well as the precarity of being a woman at this tumultuous point in time. Maysa remembered well the open, cosmopolitan nature of the 1970's and the advancements made by women in that decade, as well as the struggles of embargo and the hope of 2003. Now, she was coming home with her own stories of the prevalent corruption and fear she experienced at her university, and in public at large.

While many of the advancements for women made in the 1970's had degraded in the embargo era, it only further eroded for those women who remained in the country. Some were being pressured into otherwise seemingly unsuitable marriages out of a growing need for physical security. Though women (as well as men) with advanced education had always commanded a level of respect, this status became largely irrelevant in the post-2003 era. Maysa began seeing female colleagues with doctoral degrees coerced into marriages to ensure their safety. She recalls the circumstances of two of her peers: one married a bus driver, the other a baker. Neither man had earned a high school diploma, she tells me. "Before, she won't accept

it. But, after 2003... some Iraqi women, they start to take men less than them,” she says incredulously. “It happened in my department.” As a husband, father of growing daughters, and now feeling responsible for the newest members of his household, the heightened religious extremism and its growing threat to women’s safety in the country weighed heavily on Ahmad.

“Sometimes You Have to Choose: To Film or to Save the Person”

In Ahmad’s line of work death, it seemed, was ever present. “You know, the media always follows the action,” he tells me during our first interview. And in Iraq, that action was almost entirely based in catastrophe. He estimates that at least 90 percent of his reporting was “about violence, about the US armed forces, or [the] militias.” During one of our last interviews, I asked if he liked the work. He responds,

I liked it. Because you know the truth, and you know what’s going on. And I’m the kind of guy that wants to know what’s going on. So, I’m always in the field. In the field, not hearing what’s going on, no. I’m watching what’s going on... It was a tough job to do. Yes, I like it. I saw the tragedies, I saw the situation... I liked it so much. I liked it because I was crazy about the situation, about my country, about what’s going on. I can’t do anything, but I did my best.

Our conversations make it clear that Ahmad appreciated aspects of his employment: both its status, and the unique position and perspective it provided him to understand the state of affairs in Iraq. He speaks with an evident pride when he talks about his role in documenting the situation in his homeland.

Though Ahmad found meaning and value in his work, it also brought its own struggles. “My job was a kind of hell for me,” he disclosed during one interview. He and his camera often witnessed the devastation of Iraq and its citizens. Such situations ~~also~~ often put him in the agonizing position of having to choose between his obligations to document the tragedies of his

homeland or put down the camera and help save its people. He speaks plaintively of grappling with these enigmas,

With my camera, it's.... something filled with emotions. Because it's my country. Those people are my people. And sometimes you have to choose. To film, or to save the person. There's an explosion, and I'm close to that so I reached in time. There were people bleeding. And it's good shots for the news. So, you have to choose, are you going to help, or are you going to film? You can't do both, because you are by yourself. I face this situation so many times. I met cases that I turn off my camera, sit down to cry, and then continue after.

...One of the times people were just making some traditional ceremonies, and they were shelled by mortars. Six shells fell in about five minutes. And I was in the middle, filming. So, I left the camera, and I start helping. We collect parts of bodies in boxes, can you imagine? I went with the ambulance, I don't know how to put... It's tough, it's very tough. I'm sure if I will go to another country I will cry the same. This is how I feel. 'Cause it's not easy for me to see an old person dying, or a young girl dying, or a beautiful girl just dying, or bleeding. It's... it's a tough job to do.

Beyond the heightened awareness of violence in Iraq that Ahmad often witnessed firsthand, he also faced additional threats as a journalist with an international press agency. By 2007, 87 percent of Western journalists surveyed believed at least half of Baghdad was “too dangerous for a Western journalist to travel in” and much of the on-the-ground work and reporting in the country was undertaken by Iraqis, such as Ahmad (Pew Research Center 2007). According to those surveyed, these Iraqis faced an even greater risk. The majority reported that threats or assaults against Iraqi staff occurred at least several times a month, and sometimes daily. Fifty-seven percent of the news outlets surveyed reported at least one of their

local staff had been kidnapped or murdered within the past twelve months. One bureau chief asserted that, while the problems of reporting for Western journalists in Iraq were severe, they “pale beside those of our Iraqi colleagues, who face extraordinary chances of death each day” (Pew Research Center 2007:9). For Ahmad, to be effective in his chosen career only put him in greater danger in a world of escalating sectarian hostilities.

I used to go to the warlands with my helmet, with my shield. And if you want to take a good shot, you need to focus on it. And that makes you in danger... And the difficult thing is that, when you live in a country like Iraq you belong to a sector. So, you expect to get a shot from the people close to you in the warland, not from what we regarded [as] ‘the other side.’

Because you can’t trust the people you are with.

Between 2003 and 2015, the year Ahmad left for the United States, at least 171 journalists were killed in Iraq (Gollob and O’Hanlon 2020). As Ahmad understood the situation, the targeting of journalists, particularly those affiliated with foreign press, was common because “people think you are giving some secrets” to the other side. On some occasions his equipment was destroyed, other times he was “beaten by the army and the police.” He notes in stark words: “My life was in danger all the time. There were so many assassination attempts against me... I was feeling like a target everywhere over there, all the time.” Attempts were made against his life with “bombs under the driver’s chair.” He recalls another event in which his car was targeted and fired upon while driving down the road with another member of his news crew. He describes hearing something hit the car door hard and telling the driver to “speed up.” Once they had made it to safety, they checked in with the agency’s security team, who discovered a bullet hole in the door. “That’s my door,” Ahmad exclaims. “I was here. When the car is moving, he missed... He hit the door behind me.”

“I Didn’t See Militia... But I Can Feel Them”

It is unsurprising that Ahmad’s sense of reality in this era was darkened by his employment with the media. But in this dystopian world threat and anxiety seeped into almost every facet of life, and it did not take long for institutions to become vulnerable to the corruption that accompanied it. Maysa watched with alarm as this quickly played out within her own university. “After 2003, we inherited all this bad things. In 2003 they start, the politicians with their corruption, with their militia. It affects everything, everything in Iraq. One of them, education.” Under the threat of militia-affiliated students and corrupt administrators, “education was a disaster” she attests, with “militias control[ling] the university.” As sectarian hostilities flared, the integrity of higher education diminished, and she found herself increasingly wary at work.

Professors, intimidated directly and indirectly by students with the force of a militia behind them, felt constrained in the content and topics of their lectures for fear of how they may be interpreted and who may be offended. “My students are all in militia, so I can’t speak anything with them,” she says during a conversation about her work. “I can’t negotiate anything with them. Whatever in the book, just say what is in the book. More than outside the book, I don’t. I don’t.” Similarly, while serving the dean of her school she was approached by students wishing to lodge a complaint against the elected student leadership, regarding the ever-looping religious propaganda they had on play in the student union. They asked her to put a stop to it: “I told him I can’t.... What do you want me to do? Because I think, in myself I said, ‘If I’m gonna say any word to one of these, they gonna kill me.’”

Colleagues were threatened. Many fled Iraq in the years following 2003. She remembers a conversation with one who was preparing to leave the country: “She said to me, ‘I studied a lot, and I am very educated woman. It’s a shame on me if a student put a bullet in my head... I’m not just like a wild animal, you gonna kill me.’” Her wariness, it seems, was well-founded. Professors would find sealed envelopes containing only a single bullet on their desk after class,

left by an unknown student as a threat. The enemy was invisible, and any given student was a potential suspect. "I didn't see militia in my university, in my college," Maysa tells me, "But I can feel them." Later, she describes this instance:

Once there was a student... We had the final exam, by the end of the year. And each exam he's absent. So, he came, with the protection of militia, too many people... They put him in a big class...students are doing their final exam. He start to get his cheating papers. So, the professor who was watching, he told him to get out. [The student], he pulled the paper from him, told him 'What? Do you know who I am? This is my militia, I can kill you now, I can kill you now.' It happens, this is in my college. Once it happens.

So, the dean, he came. He was frightened, really. He gets this student, he put him in his own room... and he told him do your exam. The professors they say, 'Come on now Dean...'

He told them, 'Shhhhhh, shhhhhh. He is just one student. He want to cheat, let him cheat. Just leave. Because he gonna kill all of us.' The militia, as long as they got power, they don't have law. They will manipulate, they will do whatever. Because the students, they're loyal to the militia.

As the power of militias increased and threats grew, university administrators pursued their own alliances. The chancellor was now accompanied by bodyguards, "in a big circle around him, all of them are armed holding here their bullets... You are his colleague, [but] you can't go through this circle. You can't." Maysa argues that, while he was once a 'normal,' rational, and educated man, his compact with religious militants changed everything. "Whatever they say, he will do." Others within the university quickly followed suit: "When they saw the chancellor has done such a thing, why not me?... Wherever you go, guns."

She speaks of other colleagues: rational, critically-thinking, educated women won over by extreme religious propaganda, who began sharing their newly found “hocus pocus traditions” with her at work. She might be accosted entering the building for her decision to wear a red coat, in light of a superstition or a sectarian holy day. Attempts to refute or rationally discuss those beliefs may be met with warnings: “Oh don’t say that... maybe you gonna fall, maybe something bad will happen to you.” Over time, she often chose to say nothing, fearing the possible repercussions. She recalls a conversation with one colleague,

Her brain is washed with this propaganda... She got PhD and she said,
‘Well, I believe now in so and so, so and so.’ I look at her. She got PhD in
immunity, in biology. You will be speechless! You can’t say anything,
because if I’m gonna speak maybe something bad will happen.

With her reverence for knowledge and reason, this shift taking place within the academy was shocking. Her voice betrays not only disbelief, but an utter sense of repulsion when she recalls the changes that took place amongst many of her colleagues and the institution of higher education in this era. For Maysa, to exist within this world gone mad, “You will feel your life is hell.”

“If the Devil was Ruling Iraq, He would not do this to the People”

Confronted with an increasingly bleak reality, Ahmad came to regret the changes they had so desperately longed for in the embargo era. The country was still in shambles. The infrastructure, damaged by decades of war, was still inadequate. The lack of order and security only exacerbated the insecurities of a world that, in many ways, had literally crumbled around Ahmad and his family. As the years passed, he was increasingly unnerved by the likelihood it may never be restored. He insists,

We have nothing now. Nothing. There’s a need everywhere. Since 2003,
when the collapse happened, until now they did not build a school. They
are still using the old schools... You will find students just sitting on the

ground. On the ground... Since 2003, no school. No hospital. They did not pave a road, they did not open a new road... Even the companies, even the factories... Maybe you talk about it, but if you live it... you can't imagine you walk in the streets—'til now, since 2003—in one of the biggest capitals in the world, Baghdad... No traffic lights, until now. No traffic lights. No rules, no rules. No rules at all.

You don't know how people are living. You don't know... We have nothing. No police... There is no 911 to call... They will not go to hospital for nothing. They say if you take someone at night to the hospital he will pass away, even if he is okay, because the doctors there are not real doctors. They will give him injection or something, and he will be killed.

Marr (2012:223) ventures to state that, by 2006, the effects of the invasion and occupation had “almost pushed Iraq over the edge into a failed state.” Beyond the sectarian violence, those that remained in the country endured other challenges. Along with the societal breakdown, the country was again facing bleak economic prospects. While the years of embargo had been devastating, by 2007 indicators such as child malnutrition had exceeded even that of the sanctions era and affected almost half of all Iraqi children five and under (Dawisha 2012: 266). Daily electricity access in Baghdad was limited for many to only five hours. The inflation rate jumped radically and unemployment rose; by 2007, Dawisha (2012:266) states that “over half of the Iraqi population lived on less than \$1 a day.”

While Ahmad had faced many struggles in the years prior, in comparison to the post-2003 era he recalls a longing to return to the challenges of life under sanctions. He was not alone. Several years after the dissolution of Hussein's regime Ahmad and his crew again returned to Firdaus Square, on the anniversary of the destruction of the statue. By then, he recalls:

The people who hit the statue with their shoes, they were regretting. They say, "We wish that dictator was there, and not those corrupted people." "I feel sorry because I hit the statue with my slippers. I'm so sorry." They said, "Listen. We were oppressed, yes. And we were hoping a lot. But we wish we [could] go back to that, to be under that dictatorship, not those people. Because there was a country called Iraq, now there is no country. There is no country, nothing..."

That's why people now, they wish to go back to that regime. They wish to go back to feel safety, to feel unity. One of them said something very important, "We are not crying [about] those thieves. We are crying because we lost our country."

Ahmad's perceptions and experience of this era echoes the disillusionment and sorrow of those he interviewed in Firdaus Square who longed to return to the lives of their pasts. In this new world protecting one's own safety and security, by any means necessary, became paramount to loyalty to the country, its citizens, or morality itself. The struggles of the previous twelve years under embargo were trifled compared to the complete breakdown of the world as he had known it. He unravels the complicated sense of longing for the repression of the sanctions era in this way:

...Sometimes you hate something, but when it comes for your safety and your life, and the life of your kids, you will say I will accept everything. I will live under any situation, only to be safe. I will manage. I don't want different kinds of food, I want [only] one kind of food. But I want to see my kids safe, I want to see my family safe.

For Schutz and Luckmann (1973), the life-world is one of a common-sense understanding. But, for Ahmad, this was a world that no longer made any mundane, ordinary sense. While existence during the embargo had been one of struggle, of sacrifice, and of utterly

limited possibilities, that repressive world still enabled *some* sense of existence, some continuity and continuation of self. The everyday reality of his past may have been one that enforced a re-imagining of the self within a broader narrative of unrealized dreams and lost time, but within it there remained some sense of order, predictability, and understanding. It was one in which explication of self and world were still plausible through the horizon of looking over his shoulder, to the past.

This new world lacked a needed familiarity. It was a world Ahmad was unprepared for. The continued act of simply *existing* became far less certain in the years that followed. “It’s to compare which is good for you: to die; or to suffer [the possibility of] dying,” he says as he contrasts the two eras. While death seemed, for Ahmad, a possibility in the embargo era he retained a sense that “maybe there [was] at least hope.” But in the era of sectarian violence, death seemed an inevitability. His present world could not be taken-for-granted. Indeed, it could not be trusted.

As the years carried forward, Ahmad was unable to escape the threats and fears of this fragmenting world. He worried constantly about the safety of his family, as the children of multiple friends and family members were kidnapped and held for ransom. Maysa was coming home with stories of being harassed at street checkpoints and at work. She describes one occasion, on which she came home to find her family frantic that she had been taken:

I enter the bank. Give them my mobile, lock it. And, it takes a long time until they give you your money... When I reach the house I saw [my family], our neighbor, all waiting. They were opening the main door of the house, and they were crying. All of them were crying. I say “Why are they crying?”

“Where have you been?!!” they said. “We were calling you, because we know on Thursday you finish work at 1 o’clock, now it is 2 o’clock. We have been calling you... and you are not answering me.” [And then they

said] “And someone answered your telephone, and there are so many men talking [in the background]. So, we said that’s it. They kidnapped her, the militia kidnap her, and these are men talking to her.” My sister, she was crying—you know, falling down.

Their next-door neighbor was assassinated, along with other neighbors. The husband of one of Maysa’s colleagues was questioned and taken after one such stop. He “never came back.” The son of another colleague, who had since left for Jordan, simply vanished. She recalls,

One of our professors, his son went to his friend to say goodbye because next day he is going to Jordan to join his mom, his dad. His mom, she was calling him. ‘Get back, get back soon. I don’t want you to...’. He told them, ‘I’m on my way. I’m in the car, I’m on my way,’ and suddenly the phone was locked. And the boy vanished, ‘til now. He was just graduate from his college... So, he’s dead. They found many bodies, they said, ‘We don’t know who are these people.’

Encountering bodies strewn alongside the road, even near his children’s schools, was common. Both threat and evidence of violence were inescapable. This was a world where nowhere was safe. During one interview, Ahmad describes an attack on his home and the omnipresent sense of insecurity that surrounded him in this final era in Iraq:

To reach your house, which is supposed to be the safest place for us. Home is the safest place for the person. Home there is the most dangerous place for the family. Sometimes you spend it at night, and all the time you have your rifle just beside you. And you will be attacked at any minute, at any minute your house will be attacked. Or there will be clashes outside. They tried to attack my house once. And, you don’t need to shoot on them, but you need to shoot in the air to make them know that you have a gun... You need to be ready. This is not life.

In 2006 and 2007 the number of civilian deaths due to violence only escalated, more than doubling those of 2003.¹³ IED attacks using vehicles, or ‘car bombs,’ became a common occurrence, with anywhere from 60 to over 130 taking place in Iraq monthly between at least 2006 and 2007 (Gollob and O’Hanlon 2020). While Ahmad was no stranger to the violence from his work in the field, the attacks increasingly came closer to home. Ahmad and his family tried their best to ‘live life’ and move forward in effort to retain their grasp on a quickly slipping reality, but their day-to-day events—work, school, errands—meant they were often separated.

In a city on the brink of civil war, being the patriarch of a large family scattered about Baghdad was often terrifying. Now the father of four young daughters, each in a different school, he describes “calling the school to check” for their safety after each attack. “It happens that one day there were four car bombs. Each... is close to one of the schools,” he recalls, the memory still imparting a sense of urgency in his voice. He quickly went to check on his daughters, “I start[ed] running from here to there. Like crazy. Checking. Just to check that my girls are alive”.

While his family was safe in this particular instance, they were unable to escape the post-2003 era unscathed. In this changed world nowhere was safe. In 2007, approximately 287 bombing attacks by vehicle took place in Iraq (O’Hanlon and Campbell 2008:10), and car bombs were common occurrences on the streets of Baghdad. That year, Ahmad and his immediate family would face their own tragedy as a result of one such attack. This experience would only further solidify Ahmad’s fears and his feelings of precarity:

My wife was pregnant in 2007, with twins. And the car bomb happens not one mile, two hundred meters from my house. And our house was big, two floors big, with eight bedrooms... We were living together, we’re a big family. The windows caved in, and the curtains we have at that time,

¹³ Gollob and O’Hanlon (2020) estimates civilian deaths due to violence at 29,526 and 26,112 in 2006 and 2007, respectively.

thank God, were thick, so the pieces [of shattered glass] did not hit the kids. But the house was shaken so. The houses around, especially close to the place. It's 100 meters, so maybe 300 yards from here... Yeah. Car bomb.

I went out, I checked my family. They were okay. I went to help, and I was calling my agents to tell them about what was going on. I went out and I saw the victims. I counted the victims. I helped in saving the alive. There were parts of bodies here and there. So, I came back [covered] with blood. I did not recognize that. That took about 10 minutes maybe. I went back to check [on] my family, they started crying thinking that something happened with me. At that time my wife got miscarriage and we lost the two kids, the twins. Her health situation was so bad. It was a hard time; it was a hard time.

As time wore on, Ahmad faced more losses. One of his brothers was kidnapped and badly beaten, but a relative was able to negotiate and buy his release. Another two perished in the sectarian war. One, he tells me, "was taken, and we did not find any trace of him." Another brother was kidnapped, "just taken by some people with masks." When he located him in the morgue, Ahmad discovered he had been badly tortured before being shot in the head. The ongoing corruption in the country only exacerbated the tortuous nature of the tragedy. Unable to claim the body from the morgue, he and his family were eventually forced to pay simply to recover his brother's corpse for burial.

For Ahmad, the loss of his brothers provided an experiential understanding of the denigration of humanity and the devaluation of life in Iraq. There was no reverence, no value attached to human life; barbarism and death were an everyday reality. In post-2003 Iraq, life was 'cheap.' Ahmad reiterates: "When your life is cheap, it is worth *nothing*." His description of

trying to locate his brother in the overflowing morgues of Baghdad highlighted this vicious new reality:

It's something you can't imagine the feeling when you hear about your brothers abducted, and you go the next day to the morgues to check the dead bodies. The fridge were full, the dead bodies were filling the spaces in the corridors, around the fridge. Hundreds of dead bodies, and undead bodies. So, you need to check the fridge, and you need to check the bodies one by one to find people. You will find different people. People wearing suits, shaving going to work. Girls, old men, boys. And all in black plastic bags, or just like that. So, you jump from one to another only to find your brother. You can't imagine. "Oh, this is him... this is not him." My friend was calling me, "Oh [Ahmad], maybe this is your brother." It's just like going to a place, and you are choosing something to buy.

The cheapness of life and on-going corruption only further enabled cruelty perpetrated by those with the power of force. Due to the corruption and infiltration of the Iraqi armed forces by militia members with their own loyalties, Ahmad understood that they were often the perpetrators of the crimes, kidnappings, and assassinations taking place. Evidence indicated the same regarding the police. With no one with the seeming legitimate authority or care to protect and secure order in everyday life, Ahmad had no one to turn to when his eldest brother disappeared. He describes the frustration and terror of seeking information on his whereabouts:

... You believe that the army is part of the crime. You go to the police, corrupt. What are you going to do? What you do at that time? Do you have a relation with that gang over there? So, you go to the bad guys and say, "Please, my brother." [And they say], 'Maybe your brother is killed by now.' Do you imagine the feeling when you are begging someone, and he is just sitting, sitting the way I am sitting now. And he said, "Maybe your

brother is killed by this time. Maybe not.” So, what can you feel? It’s crazy.

In January 2008, the United States Congress signed into law the “Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act of 2007” which provided for Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) for Iraqis who had worked with the United States government or closely connected organizations in 2003 or after.¹⁴ In order to provide for “refugees of special humanitarian concern,” subsequent legislation allowed direct application to the United States refugee admission program, even for those still inside Iraq. Those eligible for the SIV also included the spouses, sons, daughters, parents, and siblings of those employees deemed eligible. While he likely was not aware at the time, the ‘privilege’ this legislation provided would open a path for Ahmad and his family years later.

Though sources suggest there was a short reprieve in the brutality of everyday life starting that same year, Ahmad’s narrative makes no distinction between the early years of the post-2003 era and those that came after. Attacks using IEDs decreased, and violent deaths in Iraq decreased below 2003 levels (Gollob and O’Hanlon 2020). Stabilization in the country may have been supported, in part, by the 2008 troop surge aimed at re-establishing order, which increased the number of American military on the ground to their highest levels since the start of the war.

As American troops in Iraq increased to almost 158,000 (Gollob and O’Hanlon 2020), then-Senator Barack Obama, on the campaign trail for the upcoming United States Presidential Election, pledged to end the war in Iraq. On November 4, 2008, he was elected the next President of the United States, taking office January 20 the following year. Turning towards the on-going situation in Afghanistan, President Obama deployed additional troops there, and began decreasing those in Iraq.

¹⁴ See *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008*, Public Law 110–181, 122 Stat. 3 (2008); and U.S. Congress. Senate. *Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act*. (S.1651, introduced July 23, 2007). 110th Congress, 1st Session.

In 2010, an average of just over 88,000 soldiers remained in the country. By 2011, the number of American soldiers in Iraq had been slashed in half, and on October 21, President Obama declared that the remainder of troops would be home by the end of the year. Acknowledging that “there will be some difficult days ahead for Iraq,” he pledged continued United States support to ensure the stability and independence of the country. Nonetheless, he proclaimed that “Just as the Iraqis have persevered through war, I’m confident that they can build a future worthy of their history as a cradle of civilization” (Obama 2011).

While the United States was withdrawing, the remnants of the militant al Qaeda organization (which had mostly disappeared in the 2007-2008 American troop surge) began to re-emerge, forming into what would become known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2013 (The Wilson Center 2019). Ahmad does not blame the United States military or government for what happened in the country after the 2003 invasion, or the 2011 withdrawal. He does, however, express frustration with the presumed resolution of the Iraq ‘situation,’ and the devastation experienced by Iraqis since 2003, seemingly for nothing. He explains,

In 2011, when President Obama took the decision to withdraw from Iraq, we Iraqis, we were so sorry for that. Because they left behind murderers in the streets, and they were sure that those people cannot rule the country. They are corrupted, they are bad people... We are paying for that.

...We were hurt a lot after 2003. Yes, I was in the war. My friends were killed, it’s a war, right? But it was not like this. The war we were all... the people were just in one army, one leadership. We don’t care if he’s... Now the people are killing each other. You can’t imagine the situation, to live with your family, living here, and people are about attack you and they have guns...

They just don't care dear; they don't care about people. Believe me.

Because I don't say I'm their victim, no. We are a family that is victim for this situation. The situation is our murderer. We will not blame the old regime, not the new regime in Iraq, and not the American army...

“Let Tomorrow Be Better; If it's Worse, You Escaped”

In 2013, Ahmad and his family had their first interview with the International Organization for Migration, and later received their first opportunity to leave Iraq. Maysa's brother, fearing for his safety because of conflicts with a “corrupt” former colleague who now held considerable political power, had also served as a translator for the American military. Because of this affiliation, he was eligible to directly apply for refugee resettlement to the United States through the SIV program. “When he applied,” Ahmad clarifies, “they ask him to register his family as part of the privilege.” Maysa elaborates,

He put our names when they ask him... what is the names of your sisters and brothers. And he said, “You can come to USA as a refugee.” I said okay. But really, I didn't think one day I will come to USA. Because I have a good job... But after year, and a year, and a year, everything it start to go worse, worse. Not bad. Worse, worse.

Despite living decades of fear and insecurity as the result of the tragedies in Iraq, initially their family maintained that the situation would improve, possibly influenced by the current downturn in violence in the country. “We said tomorrow will be a better day,” Ahmad explains. “We believed that.”

But as Maysa points out, the situation, once again, became increasingly dire. The family began selling rental property they owned throughout the city, an inheritance from Maysa's father, as they could no longer safely travel through the city to collect rent. By 2014 violence had again accelerated with over 20,000 Iraqis losing their lives. A close cousin, who Ahmad describes as a ‘brother,’ was taken by armed men. “He disappeared. ‘Til today, we did not find

him. He has a son, and his wife is still waiting for him,” Ahmad explains. The rising death toll is likely attributed, in part, to the escalations of ISIS in Iraq at this time (The Wilson Center 2019). Though the United States (along with their coalition partners) launched air strikes against the terrorist group, the number of American troops on the ground remained low (Gollob and O’Hanlon 2020). The number of internally displaced Iraqis, steadily hovering around two million for the past few years, shot up to over 3.2 million, the greatest number since 2003 (Gollob and O’Hanlon 2020).

While the American war in Iraq was over, Ahmad felt little relief; the perpetual anxiety of the vacillating situation wore on him heavily. In hindsight, he expresses immense regret that he did not leave at this first opportunity. “That was a mistake, a big mistake for me. I was all the time hoping tomorrow will be... and this is wrong. I now got the lesson,” he says. “If I got a family tomorrow will never be better. Never. Use today and move on. Let tomorrow be better. If it’s worse, you escaped.”

In May 2015, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, this sense became a certainty for Ahmad, as he experienced a loss that would forever alter the future for him and his family. As part of the holy month, he and his brothers were invited to share a meal at an uncle’s home, two hours from Baghdad. While Ahmad and his brothers escaped personal calamity by the chance of prior obligations, many members of his extended family in attendance would become the latest casualties of the unremitting tragedies of Iraq. He describes the event and the days that followed:

They finished [eating]. They have a prayer, sat in a garden. Outside in the garden, there were about 50 maybe cousins and uncles. They were targeted. They were attacked by a car bomb. Thirteen of them, immediately killed. And about 30 injured.

So, the next day, and that night, and the next day, I could not go. It’s unsafe to move at night, to drive all this two hours. Nobody can. So, I

found them collecting the parts of bodies in boxes. No, no, no, no full body. Only two bodies for my cousin, and for my uncle. One of the bodies, for the cousin, only have leg, and head in different places. My uncle, he was a cripple, he was using the wheelchair. But he was invited, and he was sitting in the garden, so he was hitted in different places. So only two graves for those. And for the rest one grave...

[At that time] I said if I will be killed, my family will be-- It's difficult. It's very difficult. I said, "That's it." I took my decision; I have to leave. I will not stay in this country after this disaster.

While Ahmad's narrative during our first interview marks this event as the catalyst for his decision to leave, the continued encroachment of ISIS into Iraqi territory exacerbated his sense of insecurity. Between 2014 and 2015 their hold on the country grew and the number of internally displaced Iraqis increased. Ahmad describes the swelling fear that not only may his family become the next victims of violence, but that even if they survived, they may be forced to flee their homes as a result. "One day there, we were living in a big house in one of the older parts of Baghdad, the wealthiest part of Baghdad," he says. "In a minute I was looking at my family, and I was thinking that maybe tomorrow or next week we will live somewhere in the desert in a tent... because fighting will be there." The anxious imaginings of such a scenario pervaded his everyday thoughts; and, given his understanding of the situation in Iraq, these imaginings quickly became probabilities:

I have experienced life, and I was working in media. I know what was going on, and especially I was filming the situation and the whole thing. So, I was imagining that idea, and that idea was all the time in my head. That my family maybe will live in a tent in the desert somewhere. Getting water to drink will be difficult. Getting food will be difficult.

So, I said no. No life here. I will leave. I said, “How can I look at the faces of my kids at that time? What shall I do if my daughters said, ‘Daddy you need to take us out from here?’” What was I supposed to do at that time?

With the seemingly real possibility of losing his home and any remaining semblance of normalcy just on the horizon, he finally began to concede to the disheartening realization that the safety and security of that future world he had clung to may not arrive. Ahmad had reached a place that Søren Kierkegaard (1843/1997:306) once succinctly described with the words, “Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward.”

Informed by decades of anxiety and experiences of catastrophe, Ahmad saw his world, again, disintegrating and his hope for the country he loved withering. He describes the progressive wariness that enveloped his everyday existence in these last months. While his work had always posed a risk, this perception intensified. His career, a clear source of pride over time became nothing but a source of constant dread. “The last months I start telling the girls that I start hating my job. I’m not feeling well in my job,” he says soberly. “It’s not because it’s hard, no. Because I am feeling that something will happen.” He elaborates,

Inside the company, I was the only Sunni at that place. They make no recognition because they are foreigners. But the Iraqis working there, the drivers and the others, were a source of risk also. So, you feel happy that you are working with a foreign company. Same time you are not feeling well because those people, especially those people who have [a] kind of relation with the militia. When I go and work with the militia to do [a] story... the militias there became officials. I said, ‘Maybe someone will shoot me any minute, while I’m filming or while I’m doing something.’ So, I start feeling the risk everywhere. Everywhere.

Ahmad and his family comprised only a minute fraction of a percentage of Iraqis aiming to flee their homeland in 2015. Prompted by the ongoing sectarian conflict, coupled with the

advances of ISIS, new asylum applications made by Iraqi nationals skyrocketed to 203,700 (UNHCR 2016). With these events and his decision to leave, Ahmad began seeking his own way out. He left his family behind for 10 days to visit a friend and explore his options in Turkey. He found the country beautiful, but the language challenging: “We don’t speak Turkish, we speak English.”

From there, he headed to Jordan. While there, he was offered “a great opportunity” to continue his work and his same position, but in Amman. “That was a great opportunity, and it’s an Arab country. Very quiet.” Having made his decision, he prepared to return to Baghdad. Then he received the call—the family had received an invitation for resettlement in the United States. He and his family quickly decided to take this chance, and he declined the employment offer in Jordan. He describes the decision this way,

When I got the chance to the United States, I left that opportunity. I said no. No. That’s America. I was so happy. I left behind my job, I left behind my house, I left behind my cars, everything, we all [did]. And I said “Hey guys, that’s it. I will go, I will leave.” I don’t know, I know nothing about this situation and how life [will be] here. But I was so happy. I was so happy to come to the United States. And I was ready, and I did that. I sacrificed everything. My job there, they say if you leave like that you will have no rights. If you leave like that, your services will be just... I said that’s fine. That’s fine. As long as it’s better for my kids. I don’t care about money.

He and his family were only seven of just under 70,000 refugees admitted for resettlement in FY 2015 (Migration Policy Institute). The percentage of Iraqis entering that year, 18 percent, was only exceeded by those from Burma (Mossaad 2016). Of the 12,676 Iraqis admitted, 890 had obtained access via the SIV program (Refugee Processing Center Archives

2021). When I asked about his fears, or worries, about his impending arrival in the United States, he scoffs:

... You can't imagine how bad life was there... I wish you will never feel that feeling...you will never have that feeling, that you will not feel safe.

It's a crazy feeling, it's like your soul wants to leave your body. You feel it.

And if you are holding a responsibility, if you are a mother or a father and you have your family and you are in charge of them... It's crazy. It's crazy.

Crazy feeling. You will give up everything, and we give up everything.

With only three weeks to prepare, they left almost everything they had known behind.

Maysa describes the family frantically trying to sell what they could: antiques, porcelain, furniture. Her voice cracks when she speaks of leaving her personal library behind. "Three weeks is not enough... we left everything," Ahmad sighs. "We came with 20 kilograms, that's 40 pounds each. You have your personal bag, some clothes, that's all." While they had no idea what was to come, Ahmad now knew he and his family could no longer live in Baghdad. On August 30, 2015, Ahmad set eyes on his homeland for the last time and began his three-day journey to the United States.

The narrative of Ahmad's earlier eras is punctuated by a mourning for, and attempted reconciliation of, a stagnated self and a future in limbo. But life in his final decade in Iraq stumbled forward haltingly, seemingly driven by sheer inertia of the memory of a prior existence. The post-2003 world allowed little space for an intentional revision of self aimed at anything other than continuing to endure.

The reflexive nature of the self is key to the ongoing formation of our understandings of who we are and our ways of being. Mead (2015) argues that the self comes into being as a result of its ability to conceive itself as both subject and object; we not only act, we also observe and consider our interactions through the broader lens of the social realities in which we exist, and those who exist within them. But how could Ahmad interpret the actions and reactions of an

unpredictable other in a world where everyone posed a potential threat, and how did that reality impede his meaningful existence amongst others? In modernity, Giddens (1991) asserts that our self-identities have evolved into “reflexive projects”—actively considered, assessed, and deliberately crafted over time. Ahmad’s recollections of his final decade in Iraq, however, suggest that reality allowed little time, capacity, or advantage for acts of thoughtful contemplation aimed at re-envisioning himself for any purpose other than corporeal survival.

As we enter the final chapter of his narrative, we can perhaps better understand the deleterious effects of the post-2003 world on Ahmad’s existence. And in moving forward, we can also begin to more substantively consider the negotiations of self that he has experienced, particularly in the post-resettlement context.

CHAPTER V: BELONGING AND UNBELONGING IN SANCTUARY

Becoming Alien; Being Human

The United States is not any other country, it's the United States... It's not always happy. But this life here is the kind of life that, maybe, we were dreaming about. (Ahmad, interview January 2017)

Broadly, this retelling of Ahmad's history aims to provide a granular exploration of shifting worlds and accompanying shifts in sense of self that may occur over time, from homeland to refuge in the United States, with a particular focus on the post-resettlement context. Our selves and our realities are inherently intersubjective—shared creations built within a pre-given social world, influenced by the perceptions of others, and further refined by our own thoughts and emotions (Schutz and Luckmann 1973). In this fashion we create an understanding of our existence within the structure of a shared world. Our interpretations of existence are also, necessarily, relational. Just as we position and assess ourselves in relation to others, we interpret our present experiences in relationship to the experiences of our pasts (Schutz and Luckmann 1973). The narratives we craft to give our lives and ourselves meaning consider and interpret the realities of the moment through those of our histories. Ahmad's current understanding of his past is grounded within the context of his present, just as the present is informed by his past. To understand change over time, and to understand the ways in which Ahmad's history has informed his present, we must consider both.

Ahmad's poignant recollection of his arrival in the United States clearly delineates the divergence between his reality of the past and present, and the corresponding effect on his ways of being. After making their way through immigration in New York City on August 31, 2015, Ahmad and his family each received a bag of legal documents, and another vital piece of information for this new life in the United States. "They [gave] us a kind of number, it's called an alien number," he laughs. "We are aliens!" And, as he compares his life in America to his past in

Iraq, he speaks with the sense that in these three days of travel he had journeyed not only across borders, but into a different world.

While Ahmad's narrative of his final era in Iraq is harrowing, the overwhelming bleakness of that former existence, its impact on the self, and the variation between these two worlds is best reflected by the way he speaks about the days that followed. While recalling the minutiae of transiting to the United States during our first conversation, he paused. His slowed speech and a deepened tone punctuated the gravitas of his words when he continued,

When we came here, we noticed something. We noticed a few days later—we noticed that we are humans. Somebody's caring about us as humans.

Ahmad highlights this renewed sense of his own humanness, often unexpectedly, during several conversations. "To be honest with you, I felt my humanity here in America," he tells me during another conversation about his early years under the authoritarian government in Iraq. "I'm so sorry that I didn't have that opportunity ten, or twenty years ago." The disintegration of the sense of his own humanity, and implicitly the humanness of others, speaks volumes to the insecurity of that existence, and the burden of fear and distrust required to survive in that world.

The self is not inherent to us as *homo sapiens*, Mead (2015) argues, rather it comes into being through our social interactions. The self that we each possess is a social construct, it is through meaning-filled coexistence that our selves are fashioned. It is this self-awareness that, in fact, *makes* us humans.

However, as Grønseth (2013:5) brings to the fore, migration is "often precipitated by a lack of being recognized as a fully human being." Ahmad's renewed sense of 'being human' in the United States speaks to a recognition of his humanness, like Mead's self, is shaped by its recognition and acknowledgement by others. His words suggest that the enduring sense of our own humanity is bound by a continued feeling of belongingness, of mutuality amongst others within our world. Similarly, Noble (2005:116) argues that a sense of belonging requires a feeling

that we are “legitimate participants, part of an intersubjective engagement in the world as human beings with acknowledged social capacities,” though recognition of immigrants as ‘fully human’ is sometimes called into question even in sanctuary.

What pieces of self and world may wither in a reality in which such a cardinal aspect of our existence, our humanness, is forgotten? In our shared worlds, collective agreements and understandings make life comprehensible, our interactions meaningful, and in turn scaffold a reality in which both existence and world are capable of being acted upon. These shared understandings and expectations of the world enable us to act with intention towards desirable outcomes, to plan for the future rather than solely focusing on our immediate, physical needs for survival. Ahmad’s plaintive remembrance of his humanness is a declaration of the losses of life in Iraq: the frequent stripping away of all but the most base aspects of existence, and the self and world that ‘could have been,’ under different circumstances.

I once asked Ahmad how he made sense of his life before resettlement. “Look here,” he exclaimed, almost scoldingly, before reiterating a concise summary of the political and wartime history of Iraq’s previous decades. His life story, in the present, readily points to the events of his homeland that ultimately led him to flee, but makes no claims to making sense of that world outside of the whims of politicians and military strongmen. “It is something you can’t imagine,” he told me repeatedly during our conversations. The only certainty in Iraq for Ahmad was uncertainty, tightly coupled with grief and loss; his only meaningful interpretation of the world was grounded in the ‘mistakes’ of the government, and of his own perseverance.

Ahmad’s hopes for life and country in Iraq were largely rooted in a return to the world he had known in his earlier years. The joy of Saddam Hussein’s removal in 2003 was quickly replaced with a desire to “go back” to the oppressions of the old regime; his frequent mentions of his “hoping for things to get better” articulate his desire to return to the Iraq of his youth and, despite its difficulties, the life it allowed. Ahmad’s final era in Iraq, as he lived it, was an unending battle for survival in a world where human life was meaningless. The overwhelming

instability that pervaded his sense of reality in Iraq, and its disabling effect on any capacity to chart his own path, is again best understood when juxtaposed to how he perceives his existence in the United States. While he acknowledges that life in America is not always easy, this life allows for potential, possibility, and hope lost to him in the previous decades. His words, from our first interview, illuminate this altered orientation,

Yes, we are in safe now. We can dream now, we can plan for tomorrow now. We can go through plans. And even we start checking the weather now. Tomorrow's gonna be cloudy, it is gonna be sunny. It's a totally different life. Totally different.

The mundanity of the everyday that has become possible, and worthy of discussion, for Ahmad in America is its own testament to the uncertainty of his existence in his final years in his homeland. There, the 'normal life' he often speaks of wanting to live was an impossibility. Here, he "check[s] the weather," he makes plans. In Iraq, he told me many times, "there is no future." In America, tomorrow is not only plausible, but a likelihood. While, at times, he speaks with uncertainty about his future in the United States, for Ahmad this is a world in which hopes for something more than sheer survival are *possible*.

For Ahmad, this changed sense of being is built upon both personal relationships, but also situated within the broader contours of American society. Within this new realm of relative order and certainty, he perceives for himself a different existence and future. As we will uncover in this current era, for Ahmad this is a life in which he is capable of not only surviving alongside, but being part of a community, and exercising an agency denied to him in his past. In making the complicated choice to flee Iraq and seek refuge in the United States, Ahmad has regained a sense of security and reclaimed authorship of his life-story. But, he also continues to grapple with a past, and present, that informs his negotiations of belonging and deservingness within the broader context of social and political resettlement difficulties and hostilities in the United States.

‘Normal People’ and a ‘Normal Life’

On the morning of September 1, 2015, Ahmad and his family arrived in a small town on the outskirts of a metropolitan area in North Carolina. A friend from Iraq, now living in the state, urged Ahmad “not to go to the places they are taking refugees,” citing poor housing conditions, safety, and the “special schools” his daughters had attended in Iraq. Instead, he offered to procure housing for the family before their arrival. Ahmad agreed, and his friend located a rental house for the family. Sparsely furnished, their new home initially contained little other than beds provided by a local resettlement agency.

The trivialities of everyday life in the United States sometimes proved baffling as they made their way through those first few months. Everyday aspects of infrastructure, such as landline telephones, a stable police force, and a functional traffic system had been lost to many Iraqis since 2003. During a conversation with both Ahmad and Maysa, she recounts the seemingly endless questions, forms, and requests for signatures required at nearly every encounter in the United States. “Everything is so complicated to get!,” she exclaims. Ahmad nods and laughs as she continues,

You have to sign so many papers, fill a lot of papers... for health insurance, for car insurance, for DMV. Even when you go for shopping and pay with your card. ‘Is the amount okay?’ Okay. ‘Do you want cash back?’ No. ‘Please sign.’ Okay. ‘Do you want your receipt?’ No, leave it. So many questions! We go to the dentist, and she will give me a board with three or four things [to fill out]. I said, ‘Damn it, I didn’t bring my glasses!’ So I ask, ‘What is this? Is this something I have to pay?’

The regulation and comparative order of this world, and the bureaucracy that accompanied it, was entirely foreign. Nonetheless, the peculiarities of this new land were a welcome change for

Ahmad, as were the relationships forged as he endeavored to create a new life in the United States.

Though Ahmad concedes that in these early days' life was often bewildering and challenging, in our conversations he often minimizes the difficulties intrinsic in the experiences of resettlement. In his present understanding of self and world, his efforts despite its difficulties are indicative of someone who "never stops" and is "always fighting," and he speaks of himself as one assuredly and proactively taking the 'right steps' to make the most of this opportunity and a new life. He tells me with pride that, as soon as he received his social security card three weeks after arrival, "the first thing I did was go to the DMV and I took the driver's license [test]." The following day he took his eldest daughter, who had interrupted her studies in dentistry when they left Baghdad, to visit a state university. He laughs as he describes this new experience,

I used the GPS for the first time in my life. I learned with the YouTube how to use it. For the first time I'm driving in America on the highway. And I was so brave, right? That's a big challenge, using the GPS for the first time in America on the freeway. Going to Chapel Hill. I said, 'Here, I'm your daddy. Don't worry.' I wore my suit, I put the tie [on]. I said, 'Let's go.' So, we never stop. We never stop.

Ahmad often frames his decision to flee Iraq, and his existence in the United States, though a perceived sense of normalcy. He describes he and his family as ordinary people. As regular people, they are a valued part of their community, as we will see in the next section. For Ahmad, any struggles in acclimating to American society and working through "the system" are often portrayed as a price he willingly paid for the chance to pursue a 'normal life.'

"The People Loved Us": Community and Safety in the United States

The family's unfamiliarity with their new surroundings, available resources and options, as well as the rural area and lack of a vehicle posed their own complications. Within two weeks of arrival, they were unable to reach the few people they knew locally, were quickly running out

of food, and had no idea where or how to get more. After a day, Maysa recalls, “We went to our neighbor, we told her, ‘We don’t have food at home, and the girls they are hungry!’” Their neighbor, herself an immigrant from India, was shocked and quickly drove them to Walmart. Afterwards, she offered a set of her car keys to Ahmad, telling him “Whenever you want, take it.”

Offers of support from others in the community further assisted the family as they settled into life in the United States. Ahmad smiles as he tells me their family was ‘adopted’ by an older, local couple,

The first months we were received, people from the area helped us. An old woman and a husband they adopt[ed] us, just like adoption. They bought us furniture, used furniture... So they helped us. And they were all the time with us trying to.

Maysa estimates during one conversation that the couple provided approximately \$1000 to assist with procuring furniture and other essential needs for their home. Along with financial aid, the couple and other community members also provided considerable intangible support as they acclimated to this new reality. Maysa laughs as she describes one event in which the microwave became ‘stuck’ and wouldn’t turn off. Several minutes of panic ensued as she tried to figure out their next steps. After calling Ahmad, who was not home at the time, they decided to reach out to the American couple. Maysa describes calling the couple and leaving them a message, and their quick response to her plea,

I said, ‘I am Maysa. And please, the microwave, it is on and on. It isn’t turning off. What should we do? We’re frightened!’ Believe me in five minutes—in five minutes they were at the door. He’s an old man, and she’s also an old woman. And he said ‘What?’ So, he put the chair... and he remove the [cover]. He said, ‘It is something wrong, there is something.’ We told him, ‘Thank you, thank you... thank you so much.’

In the coming months the older couple, their neighbors, and others continued to provide both material and immaterial support. Like other newcomers, they received monetary assistance to provide for rent and necessities. Local refugee serving organizations provided case management, assisting the family in accessing social services such as food stamps and health services, and made regular check-ins. A local church gifted the family an older model minivan, further easing their efforts towards self-sufficiency.

Ahmad diminishes the financial assistance and organizational and governmental resources that largely provided for them in their early months. While he expresses gratitude for the additional assistance provided by the community—the minivan, the furniture—he qualifies them in such a way that minimizes their physical value: “[they gave] us a minivan, a gift. It’s an old car,” and “They bought us furniture, used furniture.” Though these statements seem an attempt to downplay the material worth of these and other donations, in the context of our conversations it becomes apparent that their real value to Ahmad lies in the affective bonds they represent, and what they suggest to him about the way he is perceived by others. In essence, this sense of belongingness, affirmed by this support as well as the forging of other relationships, is paramount to any financial assistance provided.

After mentioning the gifted minivan, Ahmad continues, “But, it’s how people act. It’s how people receive you. It’s how people were helping or accepting. We were so happy; we were so happy with that.” He later explains,

We left our friends and our relatives. But now we have people, we have kinds of friends, they are more than the relatives there. More [than] the family there. We have now very close friends. We are spending so many occasions together; we are spending so many times together making visits...

He speaks frequently in our early conversations about these interactions, and others: attending dinners and other social events, celebrating Thanksgiving with American friends, frequent

phone calls and social gatherings. For Ahmad, these connections have informed a sense of community that has been vital to his experience of this new life. In another conversation he elaborates,

The most important thing is the people, how the people are treating you.

And the people were so good with us. The people loved us. The people feel so happy to invite us to their houses, to their churches, to their ceremonies. And they were so proud to introduce me and my family to the others, 'These are our friends.' And maybe, it's different from some person to another, but this is what I'm feeling actually. This is what I'm living.

While nearly all refugees receive financial aid in the way of rent assistance, food stamps, and medical care for at least the first six months, as well as support in 'setting up house' and case management via social services and resettlement organizations, this assistance is, for many, arguably meager. Moreover, it is often insufficient to provide for the expeditious self-sufficiency desired by the United States Refugee Resettlement program, and for many provides only a baseline quality of life. The support received by Ahmad's family, however, extends beyond that provided to many newcomers. While still a scant substitute for all the personal possessions left behind and being uprooted from everyone and everything they had known, the additional aid they received from the community, in some ways, likely 'bettered the odds' for his future success in the United States. In particular, access to a vehicle allowed him to quickly find employment without the worries and constraints of public transportation.

For Ahmad, these interactions and the accompanying support extend beyond a recollection of the goodwill of those with whom he shares this world; these and other encounters with the community quickly informed a sense of affinity and acceptance in his new home. Mead (2015) contends that our interactions with others are the fundamental building blocks of the self, and the effect of Ahmad's perception of 'being seen' and treated as not only 'human,' but as one

worthy of support and community in these exchanges is clear in our conversations. Yet, a solely interactional consideration of the self limits our ability to fully understand the significance of sentiments and feelings in fashioning a sense of who we are in the world.

Our understandings of ourselves, and our corresponding identities, are rooted in the kind and quality of affective and visceral relationships we forge with others (Jenkins 2014; May 2013; Mead 2015). We position ourselves, and who we desire to be, in relationship to others in the world. Thus, a sense and feelings of belongingness is intimately connected to who we are, and who we wish to become. Yuval-Davis (2006:199) describes belonging as an attachment that is felt (or ascribed) due to our social locations, and our identities and related affective attachments to any number of collectives existing in both abstract and concrete ways and at varying scales. The emotive and mental trust in belonging allows us to find our footing in the world. The decisions we make about where and with whom we belong as we move through our worlds, and the decisions of others to reject or accept us give shape to our self-narratives (May 2013:9).

Some literature has uncovered alternate experiences of day-to-day, and subsequent perceptions of unbelonging, for Arab and/or Muslim refugees. Negative encounters in public spaces, for example, have contribute to feelings of discomfort amongst immigrants (Noble 2005) as well as perceived physical insecurity for refugees (Gowayed 2019). Everyday acts of 'othering,' which are often racialized, have also contributed to senses of unbelonging amongst American citizens from the Middle East and North Africa (Khoshneviss 2019). Ahmad, however, pushes back against any similarities between these findings and his own experiences. He once mentions, in passing, that his daughter was perhaps the target of "some bullying maybe," but even this experience becomes evidence of his acceptance within the community: "The school was so perfect!" he exclaims. "I went to the school. It happens one time only, and they punished the students. They were so angry with them!"

Similarly, racialization is not notable in Ahmad's narrative of the present. While he mentions his Arab and Muslim identities on various occasions, this identification is grounded in

discussions of his past and family background, rather than how he believes he is seen in the United States. Across all of our communications, other than the singular experience noted above, there is not a single mention of an interpersonal experience of racism, or any personal encounter that he frames in a negative light. Similarly, in a study of Syrian refugees entering the United States in July 2015, Gowayed (2019) found that, initially, many of these participants did not perceive any experiences of racism; rather, they understood themselves as ‘welcomed’ based on their invitation to resettle in the United States. Instead, a sense of being racialized was formed over time.

With this in mind, it is possible that ascribed racial/ethnic identities may become informative to Ahmad’s interpretation of his life in the United States in the future. It is also possible that, while he does not convey his narrative through a racialized lens, the implications of race and ethnicity in American society may still be a part of his understanding of self in this world. Gowayed (2019) noted that experiences of “acute disrespect” in public spaces, as well as knowledge of anti-immigrant governmental policies, contributed to perceptions of racialization and racism in the United States. While we will discuss the implications of the political moment of resettlement on Ahmad’s narrative in later sections, Ahmad’s story is one that currently positions him as one who is accepted, welcomed, and valued by the local community, as supported by his interactions with others.

Safety is also inherent in a sense of belongingness (Ignatieff 2001; Yuval-Davis 2006; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019) and real or perceived threats to physical security can contribute to a sense of un-belonging for refugees (Gowayed 2019; Noble 2005). The everyday danger and anonymous threat that Ahmad experienced in Iraq spurred an understandable distrust of others. As Giddens (1991:40) argues, our ontological security—the trust and surety in the continuity of the world and ourselves that allows us to move through the day-to-day—is presupposed by a sense of our physical safety and security. “No one can guarantee his life....” Ahmad tells me during our first interview, but “here we are in safe.” In the United States, Ahmad perceives a

sense of safety stemming from the relative order and regularity that exists within the broader social structure, as well as the people that function within it. Here, if something were to happen and he was not available to protect his family, “at least they have 911”; in Iraq, “the one who will come to save you, he will kill you... The policeman who will come to help you back home, he is the one who will abduct you, who will take you as a hostage.” For Ahmad, this new existence is one that provides a sense of safety and security lost to him in his homeland. “It’s not always happy,” he tells me during our first interview, “But, this life here is the kind of life that, maybe, we were dreaming about. Where my kids can go to school and finish their studies in safe[ty], and live a normal life.”

In the United States, Ahmad no longer perceives distrust in others as requisite to protect himself or his family. As his narrative suggests, a renewed sense of physical safety has also allowed him the trust and security required to feel he is part of a community, both enabling and further contributing to his sense of belonging. Similarly, Dromgold-Sermon (2019) found that physical security, and freedom from fear and anxiety, were a fundamental dimension of belonging within a new place amongst those experiencing resettlement. For Ahmad, this sense of safety is a cornerstone of his perception of a normal life, and his capacity to build a life amongst and with others in America.

A sense of local community has also bolstered an understanding of self as one worthy of resettlement and a good life, and further honed the lens through which he interprets his successes in the United States. He is grateful for the support of friends and local organizations but, as pointed out above, undermines the receipt of tangible aid in his story in favor of the belongingness it demonstrates. He often evokes a sense of self as one that is a ‘normal person,’ telling me in one interview: “That’s why the people love us, because we’re normal people!” This sense of normalcy is also tied to his employment. “We are living a normal life,” he says in another interview. “We go to work, we go home.” While at present, Ahmad narrative does not appear to acknowledge the ways in which community support have contributed to his

accomplishments, this aid, in his eyes, supports an understanding of self that is worthy of that support as evidenced by its receipt and his subsequent accomplishments in America. In essence, his sense of belonging, this community support, and his successes hinge on an understanding of self as 'deserving' on the basis of his personal qualities, of who he *is*. Ahmad frequently speaks of himself as one who perseveres: he "works hard" and "never stops"; he is "always doing [his] best."

Yuval-Davis (2006) reminds us that even the 'individual' characteristics we attribute to ourselves are often influenced by our perception of what it means to belong to a given collective of which we are, or desire to be, a part. This begins to suggest that Ahmad's frequent mentions of his efforts and work ethic may be not only a statement of how he understands his self, but a means of aligning that self with others, as one who shares their perceived values of American life. In this sense, his successes in building a 'normal life' in the United States are evidence of his efforts as well as his embodiment of what is required of a 'deserving' refugee and a 'good American,' and further legitimize the welcome and community he has experienced. As we move forward with his story, the importance of work ethic and employment in the United States will continue to be a salient theme.

'An Other America': Anti-Immigration Attitudes and the 2016 Presidential Campaign

The broader social context of Ahmad's arrival, however, begins to suggest that his words may be an effort to bridge a space of perceived unbelonging between himself and another, less welcoming America. While he articulates a profound sense of welcome within his local community, broader public attitudes and social and political discourse expose a divergent, often less-welcoming sentiment towards refugees in the United States. A 2015 nationally representative survey found that while the American public was somewhat more likely to hold positive views about immigrants in the United States at 45 percent, a considerable 37 percent held negative views about their influence on American society (Pew Research Center 2015). Aggregate attitudes shifted based on a variety of demographic factors, and unsurprisingly varied

considerably along partisan lines. The majority of those identifying as Republican (53 percent) stated that immigrants are making American society worse in the long run; less than one-third held a positive view of their contribution to the United States (Pew Research Center 2015).

On June 16, 2015, less than three months before Ahmad and his family reached America, Donald Trump announced his candidacy as a Republican in the 2016 United States election. In his announcement speech he promised to build a “great wall” to secure our country against the nefarious threat he claimed was imminent along our southern border. “They’re not sending you!” he exclaimed to his supporters. “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists...” (Time 2015). While Trump’s derision of Mexican immigrants here (and in subsequent statements) is well remembered by many, the ‘undesirable’ immigrants he spoke of weren’t only from Mexico and Central America; they were also coming from the Middle East. Speaking of this ‘imminent threat,’ Trump proclaimed,

It’s coming from more than Mexico. It’s coming from all over South and Latin America, and it’s coming probably— probably— from the Middle East. But we don’t know. Because we have no protection and we have no competence, we don’t know what’s happening. And it’s got to stop and it’s got to stop fast... Islamic terrorism is eating up large portions of the Middle East.

Ahmad’s life history to this point shows that at least one aspect of this statement was factual: while the American war in Iraq had ended in 2011, the threat of Islamic terrorism and civil war had only increased in the years that followed. But Trump’s speech announcing his candidacy for president did little to disentangle everyday citizens from the perpetrators of the instability of Iraq and other countries in the Middle East, or to acknowledge the legitimacy of Central and South Americans seeking asylum at the southern border. Trump’s mention of both Middle Eastern and Latin American immigrants and their threat to the United States was likely, in fact, a well-considered appeal to a particular, anti-immigrant base of potential voters. Though

some immigrant groups (those of Asian and European origin) garnered largely favorable views, Pew Research (2015) found that public opinions vary considerably based on region of origin. Americans were more likely to see Latin American immigrants as negative (37 percent) than positive for the country (26 percent). An even greater proportion held negative views of Middle Eastern immigrants (39 percent), with only 20 percent stating their impact on the country was positive (Pew Research 2015). In the coming months, pervasive anti-immigrant rhetoric became the cornerstone of Trump's assertion that he would "Make America Great Again."

It is possible Ahmad was unaware of the hostilities some political candidates espoused towards refugees and immigrants prior to his arrival, but it is difficult to imagine he remained unconscious of them for long after entering the United States. During my visits to their home, a constant hum of international news reports streamed from the television in the living room. In his past as a journalist, he prided himself on his awareness of the things going on in the world. Ahmad, however, never mentions the election, or the president and policies that followed. Despite this, in later sections we will see how his sense of self and belonging in this new life are situated within the social and political contexts of this moment, in this world.

"The Most Important Thing is that You Need to Work": Agency and Employment

Beyond safety and community, Ahmad's sense of a normal life in America hinges largely on his perceptions of agency and the possibilities it opens up for him and his family—the ability to not simply envision a possible future, but to move toward that vision with effort and intentionality. Building on the works of Kierkegaard, Giddens (1991:48) argues that "In 'doing' everyday life, all human beings 'answer' the question of being; they do it by the nature of the activities they carry out." By extension, in doing the work of 'being' in the day-to-day we construct and carry out a sense of our existence, of who we are. As this suggests, we are, in essence, not only who we *think* we are, but what we *do*. Moreover, our everyday behaviors are not only an aspect of our being in the present, but a part of our continuous story of who we will be, or aim to become, in the future. As Giddens (1991:85) notes, the reflexive self-making we

engage in “depends as much on preparing for the future as on interpreting the past.” Within Ahmad’s narrative, employment is a key aspect of how he understands himself in the past, the present, and in preparing for the future of himself and his family.

In Iraq, being a journalist played a pivotal role in Ahmad’s understanding of self and the world. There is no doubt the nature of his job obligated him to maintain a heightened awareness of the calamities unfolding around him every day. But, confronted with a situation he could not change, his role in exposing “the truth” by documenting the events of his homeland provided a sense of meaning, and purpose to an existence that often felt dark, meaningless, and random. As we speak about his job in Iraq, he sighs. “I can’t do anything [about the situation],” he says. “But I did my best.” By documenting the realities of Iraq through reporting, Ahmad was able to gain some sense that he was doing *something* other than simply standing by, watching the disintegration of his homeland. While that world was one in which he exerted little control in the day-to-day, his choice to take part in making those truths accessible to international audiences was one of the few aspects of the everyday he could direct, and his work became a vital piece of how he understood himself in his final decade in Iraq.

The way he speaks about this work suggests he derived a considerable sense of his worth and value as a result of this employment. His words express an evident pride—in both his personal contributions to his employer and as a journalist at large, and the perceived status conferred by both. He often emphasizes his expertise and mastery of a diversity of relevant skills, and the responsibilities of his roles. He also frequently names his employer, a leading international news organization, in a way that suggests an increased sense of legitimacy for the quality of reporting, and his own capacity as a journalist.

Ahmad’s employment prospects in America, thus far, have not been so illustrious. This is a common occurrence, as the expectations of economic self-sufficiency within 90 days of arrival encourage resettlement agencies to place refugees into ‘survival jobs’ with partner employers, generally disregarding their credentials and experience. As Lumley-Sapanski (2021) argues, the

value and viability of refugee employment history and skills in the United States is determined by the site of resettlement; additional barriers in legitimizing their credentials and/or skills, such as licensing and certifications, often further impede a return to previous employment for those in professional and highly skilled positions. The specificity of his employment experience and skill set, coupled with his new location and these barriers of entry, have likely made obtaining work in his past field near impossible. Several weeks after arrival Ahmad began his first job in America, working as a full-time, third-shift security guard at a large local hotel. He laughs as he recalls,

I was the only security officer who was not escaping to have a nap. They [said], 'You are crazy!' When I come here the next day they brought [me] cold water, and my food. [I ate] just a swallow. And, I change shoes from time to time, maybe I have 3 or 4 new shoes there. And I was so happy. When they were talking to me, I said, 'You are so sweet. But I remember the situation [in Iraq]. When I'm walking here I feel my freedom and I feel safety. And, something inside of me is not inside of you, so I will not sleep!'

Sometimes Ahmad's voice betrays a sense of despondency when he acknowledges he will likely be unable to find work as a journalist in the United States. More often than not, however, he quickly brushes off such sentiments. "I will never stop, I am always trying to develop myself," he tells me during our first conversation. "I wish to work in my job, and in my field. But, this is not a reason to stop if I did not find a chance." For Ahmad, this sense of 'doing' and being able to 'do' both in the moment, and as oriented towards a future over which he now perceives a sense of control, is the second cornerstone of his new, ordinary existence.

In our conversations, Ahmad often equates this ability to create a normal life in the United States to employment, and "working hard" to achieve a desired quality of life. This is unsurprising, given the emphasis placed on obtaining a job as quickly as possible and the

limited financial support provided to refugees. In conjunction with other governmental offices and refugee serving organizations, the United States Office of Refugee Resettlement (2021) aims to assist newcomers “in becoming integrated members of American society” by providing “social services that help refugees become self-sufficient as quickly as possible after their arrival in the United States.” Non-profit resettlement agencies (and ancillary service providers) who do much of the on-the-ground support work for resettled refugees also frequently stress self-sufficiency and quick employment for newcomers.

His words suggest that his quick and continuous employment in the United States, despite the loss of his long-standing career, are understood as a further testament to his perseverance and tenacity in making the most of this new life. Giddens (1991:86) notes that freedom from ‘situations of oppression’ is necessary to increase lifestyle possibilities, and while many experiences of Ahmad’s past left him stagnated and grieving for a self and future that could have been, he seems determined not to lose the opportunity to embrace his present, and future possibilities in America. Moreover, his narrative suggests that his efforts are informed by a desire to present a self that both wants to be, and is, a contributing member of society, regardless of his occupation.

In the United States, Ahmad seems to have grasped tightly to the familiar Americanisms of work ethic, self-sufficiency, and a “bootstraps mentality,” all of which hold a predominant place in his self-narrative of this final era. While the *nature* of his employment in Iraq infused him with a sense of pride, Ahmad now perceives his value through his willingness to work, in any job, and the life it has afforded for his family. During another conversation he reveals,

Everyday we are living in challenge, where there’s a lot to learn here. It’s not easy. And, the most important thing here is that you need to work. And this is very important. So, we worked in different kinds of jobs. And I will never stop with that. It’s not the kind of job I’m doing, but it’s the way

I'm doing it. And it's how I feel when I'm doing it. It's a job. We are so happy to do our jobs.

By October 2016, Ahmad was offered a position teaching English to other newcomers. When I first met him, in early 2019, he was still engaged in this work. His wife held an entry level position at a local grocery store. Maysa, as Ahmad explained, stayed busy "driving the kids" to and from school and appointments, and assisting with other household needs. In a later conversation, she explained that she had applied for several jobs and interviewed at a local library, but had not received a job offer. She periodically checks job postings but does not appear particularly bothered by her unemployment. While she does dream of pursuing a position in academia she, like Ahmad, acknowledges that part of her life was likely left behind in Iraq.

Despite challenges, Ahmad's efforts have been rewarded and he and his family, on most accounts, appear well settled into this "normal" American life. In May 2018, he purchased an attractive two-story house in a new development. The interior is appointed with oriental rugs, which he mentions or calls to my attention on several occasions, and thick draperies accent the windows. The plush upholstered furniture is pristine. A dark wooden armoire in the living room houses a large, flat screen television. Two nice vehicles sit in the driveway. The purchase of this home and its furnishings is not only a point of pride, but is another important piece contributing to the perceived normalcy of his life,

We bought this house because here we wanna live our normal life, right?

So, we bought the house, we start[ed] our life. My wife is working, I'm working... With everything we buy here we say we are doing great.

Everything. We bought these carpets, we say, 'Yes we are doing good.'

We bought everything, furniture. We say, 'We're doing good.'

He speaks often of living 'normally' and his self-sufficiency. "I want to live normal," he declares during another conversation. "I have money, we have a house. We bought a house here. We did not take it in illegal ways... We wanna move on in our life."

An important aspect of constructing our self-identities, Giddens (1991:81) argues, is encompassed in the concepts of *lifestyles*, and relatedly, *life-planning*. As the habituated practices of the everyday they not only serve practical purposes, but also give 'material form' to our stories of self and cannot be reduced to 'simple consumerism.' In modernity, a multitude of alternatives obligate decisions both large and small regarding our ways of being in the world. These choices orient our everyday decisions, creating patterns that provide continuity in our sense of self across time. Life-plans, in this sense, become the "substantial content of the reflexively organized trajectory of the self" (Giddens 1991:85). Necessitated by the multiplicity of lifestyle possibilities, these future plans are organized in relationship to our self-narratives.

Though employment is, for most of us, an obligatory reality of everyday life and thus may not afford the same individual agency as other milieu, it is also a mediating factor of the lifestyle possibilities available for choice. Decisions as they pertain to employment and work environment, Giddens (1991:82) argues, is a fundamental aspect of lifestyle orientation. Ahmad's emphasis on his employment is more than an explanation of how he spends his time. It is a statement of the 'why' behind his choices, why he orients and understands himself within the world. The importance he places on his successes, and the material accomplishments they have provided for his family are clear in our conversations.

Our lifestyle choices and life plans are not only informed by options which are possible given our socioeconomic standards, Giddens' (1991:82) argues, but also by the "visibility of role models" and other social influences. While modernity provides innumerable options, our experiences of world and self are also mediated by any number of institutions and other abstract systems which are simultaneously present within, but removed from, everyday life (Giddens 1991). Ahmad's choices regarding his orientation toward the world and others, his everyday

behavior, and relatedly his sense of self, are mediated by the desirability of these available possibilities—in terms of ways of life, and relatedly, ways of ‘being seen.’ It is worth noting that his home is not only attractive and well-maintained, but by all appearances could be that of any other ‘normal’ middle-class family in America. Our conversations suggest that, within Ahmad’s narrative, his employment, as well as other decisions pertaining to the material and his conduct are synonymous with his ‘normalcy.’ They serve as one of many assertions that he is ‘like us.’ He has a home, he has a family, he goes to work and works hard to achieve the ways of life he desires. Moreover, he has been successful.

Beyond the products of ‘success’ and validation of his narrative of perseverance, I suggest that Ahmad’s everyday choices in the United States are also often motivated by a perception of what it means to live a normal life in America, and a continued negotiation of his place within it. The drawing of parallels between himself and other ‘normal’ Americans—in his ‘welcome’ and community, his work ethic and success, and his everyday life choices—are an act of reflexive self-making, and subsequently, a negotiation of belonging in this new life. As we move into later sections, we will discuss the role of economic productivity in constructions of deservingness, how Ahmad uses employment and other attributes to distinguish himself from others, and what these negotiations of deservingness and belonging tell us about his experience in the United States.

Immigration and Politics in the United States

In many ways, Ahmad’s story appears as the quintessential, classic assimilation tale: an immigrant arrives, gratefully, to the United States and works hard to carve out his own piece of the ‘American Dream.’ Within his story, his quick and confident strides towards creating a new life in America tell the story of who he understands himself to be, but also who he aims to become. As we will come to see, however, his narrative is also carried forward by an undercurrent aimed at asserting his legality and legitimizing his value, amongst a tirade of anti-

immigrant discourse and within the larger structure of political uncertainty for refugees and other immigrants. Our conversations suggest that his hopes for this new life are often tainted by a sense of hesitation and insecurity. In his liminal status—‘legal’ but not-yet-citizen—and situated within the specific context of his arrival, as well as his past, Ahmad perceives a new sort of precarity in the United States.

Immigration Policy and Refugee Resettlement

Though the United States proudly touts its history as a nation built by immigrants (Goodman 2015) anti-immigrant attitudes are far from new in America, and have served as the basis of political action and policies far back into our history. In 1882, the country passed The Chinese Exclusion Act, noteworthy as the first significant national immigration restriction, and one that set a precedent for ‘gatekeeping’ constructed on the basis of race/ethnicity (Lee 2002). The sentiment behind the act, and a later Supreme Court decision that upheld it, positioned Chinese immigrants as a ‘dangerous’ threat from which the nation needed protecting (Lee 2002). The Immigration Act of 1917 not only extended restrictions to all of Asian origin, but also effectively created an additional national origin and class requirement through literacy requirements (DeSipio and de la Garza 2015:74).

In 1921 and 1924 the establishment of immigration quotas only partially shielded the racialized restrictions they upheld, by limiting the number of admitted immigrants based on country of origin, and how many of those nationals were already in the United States. Created using decades old census data, quotas effectively excluded the ‘less desirable’ that were part of more recent immigrant flows from Southern and Eastern Europe (DeSipio and de la Garza 2015:74). Public demands in subsequent years led to implementation of the Bracero program, which addressed the need for manual laborers by providing an immigrant labor pool; advocates for family reunification were answered when previous policies gave way to the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act which repealed immigration quotas, instead prioritizing family reunification and those with specialized skills (DeSipio and de la Garza 2015:76-77).

Subsequent immigration policies contributed to a more veiled, but still present, form of gatekeeping, including one in 1996 that made immigrants guilty of some misdemeanors eligible for deportation, along with limiting their legal rights (DeSipio and de la Garza 2015:81).¹⁵ Another passed in the same year increased the income required for those aiming to serve as immigrant sponsors, and put additional limitations on refugee's access to social welfare programs (DeSipio and de la Garza 2015:83).¹⁶ Public attitudes towards immigrants and immigration, across decades of gatekeeping and reform, has frequently been negative (Desilver 2015; DeSipio and de la Garza 2015). As previously noted (and as we will continue to discuss) the interplay of anti-immigrant sentiments and politics continues into the present.

Nonetheless, the United States government has largely stood by its commitment to refugees since the passage of the 1980 Refugee Resettlement Act, which excluded refugees from annual immigration limits, leaving the number of yearly admissions to be determined by the Executive Branch. Black (2006:63) noted that the term *refugee* implies “uprootedness and exile,” necessitating “dependence on humanitarian intervention,” in such a way that their vulnerability and deservingness is often unquestioned. And yet, those fleeing persecution in the decades both before and after the 1980 Act often have not been welcomed by the majority of the American public (Desilver 2015; Krogstad and Radford 2017). In the realm of public opinion, Krogstad and Radford (2017) found the majority of registered voters for 2016 (54%) expressed disapproval of acceptance of Syrian refugees, despite the unfolding crisis in the country, stating it was not an American responsibility. This is unsurprising, given decades of data which, as Krogstad and Radford (2017: Key Fact 6) explained, “shows Americans have largely opposed admitting large numbers of refugees from countries where people are fleeing war and oppression.”

¹⁵ See “The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996.”

¹⁶ See “The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.”

Which governments are deemed legitimate to ‘flee from,’ and what criteria are required for ‘being’ a refugee has shown to be variable over time, and the number of refugees admitted annually remains a political—rather a humanitarian—issue (Hein 1994; DeSipio and de la Garza 2015). Determinations regarding ‘legitimate’ refugee and asylum status are also both subject to, and constitutive of, negotiations of moral distinctions made within the realm of legislation (Shiff 2020). Refugee admissions have fluctuated radically over the years, dropping from over 200,000 in 1980 to around 60,000 in 1983 (Migration Policy Institute 2021). Almost ten years later, in 1992, more than twice that number were resettled (132,531).

In recent history, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, had a wide impact on refugee admissions into the United States, with admissions falling drastically to 27,131 for 2002 (American Immigration Council 2016; Bruno 2017). New processes in subsequent years, however, supported increased admissions and quickly returned entry to approximate prior levels of around 70,000 (Bruno 2017). Over the decades, regardless of public opinion or political maneuvering, the United States has maintained its place as a world leader in accepting refugees and, on average, has resettled more each year than all other resettlement countries combined (Fee and Arar 2019). With the exception of two years following the September 11th attacks, no year since 1980—until the 45th presidential administration—saw less than 41,000 refugees make America their home (Migration Policy Institute 2021).

Nation of Immigrants No More? ‘Making America Great Again’

By the time Ahmad had arrived in the United States the 2016 presidential campaign was well under way, and the drone of anti-immigrant arguments and positions in the public sphere was growing louder. These sentiments had been building for some time, and were bound to carry over into politics, and subsequently broader social discourse. Hochschild’s (2015)¹⁷ study

¹⁷ See Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2018. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York, NY: The New Press. P.p. 135-150.

of the far right in rural Louisiana found that many, seeing their piece of the ‘American Dream’ quickly fading, understood their changing realities as the result of ‘others’—people of color, immigrants, refugees—‘cutting in line’ with the support of liberal policies. A growing immigrant population, in conjunction with the ‘immigrant threat narrative’ perpetuated by mass media, has also been attributed to the growing and widespread anxieties regarding the effect of immigrants on the country and its citizens (Abrajano and Zoltan 2015). Once awakened, Abrajano and Zoltan (2015:27) argue these anxieties “seek a political home.” For many in 2015, and the years that followed, it seems that Donald Trump became their patriarch—one who would not only legitimize their plight but would *do* something about it.

While then-candidate Trump was not the first, nor the only American political candidate to stake a claim against immigration, I argue that he was perhaps the loudest, most brash, and most publicized in recent history, and that a considerable portion of his support was rooted in the divisive language he employed to portray immigrants. A shift to an “outright exclusionary nationalist discourse” is not isolated to the United States, and as Yuval-Davis et al. (2019:17) point out, “more material and legal walls have been erected between and within states to prevent ‘undesirable’ migrants from entering or staying in this or that country” in this era. However, Trump’s rhetoric, the controversial United States-Mexico border wall, and travel bans (as well as other statements and actions) solidify the role of nationalist discourse in his administration. Moreover, “promises to that effect” were integral to Trump’s success and subsequent popularity amongst broad swaths of the American electorate (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019:17).

On his personal twitter account,¹⁸ which he seemingly favored for its instant audience and ability to communicate directly to his base and the public at large, he frequently targeted

¹⁸ Donald Trump’s personal Twitter account was permanently suspended by the platform following the events of January 6, 2021, and with it all previous tweets and retweets (see company statement at https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension). A searchable online archive of his

'illegal' immigrants and Muslims during his campaign.¹⁹ In one such tweet, on November 22, 2015, he argued: "13 Syrian refugees were caught trying to get into the U.S. through the Southern Border. How many made it? WE NEED THE WALL!" followed by "We better get tough with RADICAL ISLAMIC TERRORISTS, and get tough now, or the life and safety of our wonderful country will be in jeopardy!" (The American Presidency Project).

Over the following months, refugee resettlement became a clearer collateral target of the campaign. Citing the need to "get smart and protect America," he bashed the opposition's plan to increase refugee admissions from the Middle East. While the Obama administration raised the refugee admissions ceiling for FY 2016 to 85,000 (a 15,000 increase over the previous year) in response to the crises in the Middle East (Desilver 2015), Trump stood in stark opposition. By December 2015, he had called for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" citing "great hatred towards Americans by large segments of the population" and the risks of Sharia Law to American governance (Estepa 2017).²⁰

Over the coming months, at rallies and in speeches, he continued his attack on refugees and other immigrants, as well as refugee resettlement. Conjuring the 'threat' posed by refugees and other immigrants and the need to 'protect' the nation in a speech on August 31, 2016, he cited the "countless innocent American lives [that] have been stolen because our politicians have failed their duty to secure our borders and enforce our laws" (The New York Times 2017). Regarding refugee resettlement, he railed against the opposition's plans to boost admissions in

account (as well as other politicians and documents) is available via the American Presidency Project online archives, hosted by the University of California Santa Barbara (at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>).

¹⁹ Over the course of his campaign, Trump targeted 'illegal' immigrants at least eleven times, and disparaged Muslims and/or equated Islam with terrorism at least seven times on his personal Twitter account alone. At least two tweets explicitly portrayed refugees as a national security threat ([The American Presidency Project](#)).

²⁰ This statement was first posted on Donald Trump's campaign website. Like some other divisive statements made before, and during, the course of his presidency this one was removed in 2017 on the cusp of a second court challenge to his controversial travel ban, commonly referred to as the "Muslim Ban." (Full text of statement available in Estepa 2017.)

response to instability in Syria and the Middle East region. Instead, he argued for repatriating the persecuted to 'safe zones' funded by the Gulf nations. "[W]e have no idea who these people are, where they come from," he argued. "I always say Trojan horse. Watch what's going to happen folks, it's not going to be pretty" (The New York Times 2017). Less than three months later he was elected the next President of the United States.

"A Fear Inside": Political Uncertainty in America

Initially in our conversations, Ahmad expressed satisfaction and a surety in this life in the United States, in spite of Trump's presidency and the politics. In our first interview he proclaims, "Even if it will be good [in Iraq], we will never leave the United States." He continues, "This country was good with us. According to my experience, the politicians will not be there all the time. The politicians will come and go, and each has his policy." Later, he speaks with a profound sense of confidence in his future in America: "I am optimistic here. No fears at all... I'm so optimistic for the future." He continues,

And I'm sure—I can say that—I'm sure that the future will be bright for my family, and for me also. One day I'll go back to Iraq and I will tell my brothers there and my cousins, my friends, that in 5 years in the United States what I failed to do in my homeland in 50 years.

Over time, as our conversations continue, however, his words begin to betray his assurances of confidence. Despite his outward attestations of belonging in the United States, his performance of optimism sometimes seems an attempt to project a desired future reality into existence. During this same conversation, as he discusses his work ethic and efforts at self-development in the United States, he first alludes to a sense of wariness, of apprehension:

I'm always trying. I'm always doing my best. So, I think... unless there will be... There's a kind of fear inside that there will be a political decision against us. And this is something... actually it's something, I have it in my mind. Yes.

Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) argues that in our present, globalized world, borders and bordering processes have moved from the periphery and to the center, and the interplay between political bordering projects and othering in the day-to-day only continue to escalate; moreover, the 2016 Presidential election is indicative of this effect. Bordering is, in essence, a political articulation of belonging and unbelonging on national and international scales—constitutive of political processes, and the negotiations of self and others that result. As Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) warn, bordering and its effects are increasingly moving into the sphere of everyday life.

Ahmad rarely mentions politics explicitly, even in a general sense. In the course of all of our conversations, he has never once spoken directly of the President of the United States, past or present. Nonetheless, the effects of bordering, and the accompanying political rhetoric and social discourse, is apparent within Ahmad's narrative of self and life in America. They have provoked deep-seated anxieties around an unenviable future for himself and his family, which he first speaks of with these words:

Sometimes when you hear the situation... and you have these goals to which you could not achieve, and you escaped your country because of violence to save your kids, and you will start thinking your kids will have no future here. You feel so sad. You feel so sad...

On January 20, 2017, Donald J. Trump was sworn in as the 45th President of the United States. One week later he signed Executive Order 13769, which included a “national security travel ban” using language that marked foreign nationals from seven, predominantly Muslim countries of origin—including Iraq—as threats to national security.²¹ While the previous administration had set the refugee admissions ceiling for 2017 at 110,000, (Office of the Press Secretary 2016), the executive order halted the refugee resettlement process in its entirety for

²¹ See *Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States*, 82 FR 8977 (January 27, 2017).

120 days. While put forth as a temporary action, it left open the possibility that refugee resettlement would only continue for nationals of those countries deemed acceptable by the administration appointed Secretary of State, Secretary of Homeland Security, and the Director of National Intelligence.

Reports quickly relayed news of the chaos as the travel ban was haphazardly applied in the hours after its implementation²² Some refugees and others, already in transit when the order went into effect, were detained at US airports. Others were denied entry to connecting flights into the United States. Refugees and other foreign nationals preparing to come to the United States, many of whom had years invested in obtaining resettlement and/or residency approval, were advised to put their upcoming travel plans on hold for an indefinite period. At least one Syrian refugee was reportedly detained on arrival, and faced imminent deportation (Shear, Kulish, and Feuer 2017).

After nearly a year and a half, Ahmad was largely settled into life in America when executive order went into effect and was, presumably, legally unaffected. As a permanent resident Ahmad is a 'Green Card' holder which, among other things, typically allows for international travel and re-entry into the United States. On the wake of this order, however, it was interpreted by The Department of Homeland Security such that it "also barred green card holders from those countries from re-entering the United States" (Shear et al. 2017). The administration later clarified that while re-entry may be a possibility for these permanent residents, this would be approved on a case-by-case basis (Shear et al. 2017).

Before even a full day in place, some aspects of the order were halted by two court rulings. A temporary injunction suspended deportations of individuals who had arrived with valid visas or refugee status. Ordered by the Federal District Court in Brooklyn it cited that, "absent

²² See Shear, Kulish and Feuer 2017; Macguire, Gostanian, and Ortiz 2017; Walters, Helmore, and Debghan 2017.

the stay of removal, there will be substantial and irreparable injury to refugees, visa holders, and other individuals from nations” subject to the order.²³ A similar ruling came shortly thereafter by the Federal District Court in Virginia (Shear et al. 2017). Within a week, another ruling blocked many aspects of the travel ban on a national scale. Affected provisions included those aimed at stopping legal entry for nationals from the targeted countries, the halt of the Refugee Admission Program as well as the indefinite exclusion of refugees from Syria, and provisions aimed at prioritizing refugees fleeing religious persecution when admissions resumed.²⁴

On March 6, the president signed a second Executive Order noting that implementation of the previous ban had been “delayed by litigation,” and backtracked on some of the most contentious aspects of the original order. The new order, while still barring entry to nationals from six countries (with the exception of case-by-case waivers) removed Iraqi nationals from the list of those excluded. Permanent residents of the United States, including “any refugee who has already been admitted to the United States,” were also exempt from these restrictions (National Archives 2017b).

Despite the new provisions of Executive Order 13780, which explicitly secured the right of travel and re-entry for refugees (not to mention a subsequent ruling that blocked the second ban before it came into effect²⁵) it seems the grip of doubt had already taken hold. While Ahmad never specifically refers to the so-called travel ban, it appears the lingering anxiety was enough to influence his choice not to return to Iraq several months later to attend his father’s funeral. During our second conversation, in early 2019, he speaks of this decision,

²³ See *Hameed Khalid Darweesh and Haider Sameer Abdulkhaleq v. Donald Trump; U.S. Department of Homeland Security; U.S. Customs and Border Protection; John Kelly; Kevin K. McAlleenan; James T. Maiden*, 17 Civ. 480 (January 28, 2017).

²⁴ See *State of Washington, et al. v. Donald J. Trump, et al.*, C17-0141JLR (Temporary Restraining Order, February 3, 2017).

²⁵ See *State of Hawai‘i and Ismail Elshikh v. Donald J. Trump et al.*, Cv. No. 17-00050 DKW-KSC (Order Granting Motion for Temporary Restraining Order, March 15, 2017).

My father passed away two years ago. I could not go. Now, when I talk to my mother, she's crying all the time on the phone, I want to see you before I pass away. I just can't go. I wish to go, but I can't go because I don't trust the process. I'm legal here, I have the green card. I can have the travelling document—I can get it, maybe it will take a few months—but still I said no. I will not take those. I still regard it a kind of risk. There are friends who are leaving with the green card—only with the green card. Not travelling document, nothing. But I will never do that. I will never accept that.

Even two years after the debacle of Executive Order 13769, he still alludes to a sense of uneasiness about maintaining his 'place' in America. Amidst the ongoing court battles and a Presidential Proclamation (see National Archives 2017c) which aimed to institute a third travel ban for the nationals of certain countries (not including Iraqis) Ahmad was, perhaps, right to be wary. Subsequent derogatory and well-reported statements by then-president Trump aimed at immigrants and refugees likely exacerbated these insecurities. In the coming years, a notable decrease in refugee admissions, from 53,716 in 2017, to 11,814 in 2020 (Migration Policy Institute 2021) provided clearer evidence of the administration's views on refugees and refugee resettlement. Despite his permanent resident status, in the wake of the previous administration's decrees and policies Ahmad found himself confronted with a new sense of uncertainty, of unbelonging, in relation to self and the state.

On a global scale, borders become "sites of national belonging" (Yuval-Davis 2019:8). As ever shifting yet "naturalized constructions of a particular hegemonic form of power relations" (2006:199) understanding (un)belonging obligates an interrogation of the 'ethical and political value systems' used to create these boundaries. *Cultural citizenship*, conceptualized by Ong (1996:738) as the 'cultural practices and beliefs' used to delineate belonging which are produced in negotiation with the state, attests to its influence in discerning these values.

Drawing a line in attempt to maintain the distinction and distance between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ borders are the created through political projects of governance, but also the politics of belonging—political projects “aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects” (Yuval-Davis 2019:197).

As evidenced by Donald Trump’s many statements, these discourses of belonging are frequently racialized and framed through the lens of securitization; they legitimate drawing boundaries to mitigate perceived ‘threats’ to national security as well as ‘national’ culture (Brubaker 2017; Khoshnevis 2019; Serod 2014; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). Increasingly, religious characterizations, such as with Muslim (im)migrants, are also employed to determine who is, and who is not, a legitimate part of the nation (Brubaker 2017; Khoshnevis 2019; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). Trump’s Executive Orders can be understood as indicative of a ‘heightening’ of previous policies which racializes Muslims and Arabs, one that homogenizes a diverse group into a uniform, threatening ‘other,’ and portrays refugees as perpetrators “of the very violence they are fleeing” (Gowayed 2019:279). In addition, though understood legally as ‘white,’ American citizens of Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds do not always experience that sense of belonging, or integration into broader society, as do their euro-ancestry counterparts (Khoshnevis 2019). Serod (2014) further argues that Muslim identity itself has become racialized.

The bordering practices that seek to include and exclude these constructed collectives are, as Yuval-Davis et al. (2019:24) explains “situated and constituted in the specificity of political negotiations as well as in the everyday life performances of these negotiations.” Ahmad never includes in his narrative examples of everyday bordering or a racialized sense of belonging or unbelonging; and yet, his perception of the United States ‘political situation’ and perception of the politics of belonging aimed at his exclusion is implicit in his sense of precarity. Migrants and immigrants, like Ahmad, are often subject to bordering not only within the political

realm but within their day-to-day experiences. These processes, and related distinctions of (un)belonging “[affect] people profoundly” in many aspects of life—in both their countries of origin; and, for (im)migrants, in those where they reside, or transit through (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019:23). The impacts of bordering, the politics of belonging, and the everyday performances of these negotiations, Yuval-Davis et al. (2019:25) eloquently argues, are vital contributions to our understandings of who we are as selves situated within the world:

[T]he definitions of who we are and what our locations in the world is, are both constructed by discourses and imaginaries of particular bordering political projects of governance and belonging that are affected by the situated positionings, identifications, and normative value systems of the specific social agents that take part in this ‘everyday’ social dynamics.

Articulations of national belonging, from the scale of federal immigration policy and down into everyday life, have a substantial impact on lived experiences. Despite Ahmad’s outward attestation of his belonging and value—frequently articulated through the themes of community, normalcy, and self-sufficiency—our ongoing conversations suggest these assertions may be overstated attempts to compensate for the real worries he perceives over the fate of himself and his family in the United States. The politics of belonging, and the political bordering processes they inform enforce social divisions, marking collectivities as belonging or not belonging within a given time, place, and context. They divide and simultaneously create groups, along with their presumed characteristics, that do (not) belong from amongst the ‘whole.’ As a process of inclusion and exclusion, bordering is intimately bound with notions of belonging, and subsequently, of self. In the upcoming section, we will see how Ahmad negotiates self and belonging within this context.

Negotiating Past, Present, Legality, and Deservingness in the United States

The sun now embraces us in a new land.

We try to return the embrace, but we hear

Aleppo's song in the distance.

We hear

Baghdad's poetry shake the ocean floor.

—Ahmed M. Badr, Iraqi poet and refugee

Ahmad's lived history is not only extraordinary, but remains a vital part of who he is, and how he understands the world. Along the journey to refuge that which is left behind remains in national histories and life stories, and the memories of both which endure. Those histories are carried forward, shaping our understanding of self, perception of the world, and interpretations of the present. In the poem "(Sun) A Tribute to Alan Kurdi," Badr (2020) speaks to the perils of many a refugee passage, and the complicated realities of refugeehood and resettlement; in doing so, he articulates the struggles inherent in reconciling two varying existences—between homeland and new land—and the reverberation of the past into the present. For Ahmad, there is little doubt that Baghdad, though thousands of miles away, remains as more than a distant memory. The histories of Iraq, and that of his family, have propelled his own history forward through the present. Moments from his past, he tells me, continue to find him in dreams of the 'bad things.' Given the gravity of his past, it surely continues to exert considerable influence over his perceptions of life in the United States.

Schutz and Luckmann (1973) explain that our interpretations of phenomena are filtered through schemas which give shape to our understanding of the everyday in ways that seem 'natural' and are thus taken for granted. Though Ahmad has, in some sense, reconciled with his history, the "life he lost" as the result of decades of "mistakes" by the Iraqi government, and the

cruelty of those in power remains a fundamental part of his life-story and the self this story inhabits.

From an early age, his experience of life and understanding of his place within the world were heavily influenced by the whims and wants of the state. We can recall that in Ahmad's early years he describes "growing up" with the government, likening it to a part of his family of origin. As the years passed his experiences with, and understanding of, the influence of the government was only heightened by his witness of everyday censorship and brutality. To be successful, party membership was obligatory; to express dissent was to face grave consequences.

The power and influence of the leaders of Iraq, in his purview, remain responsible for many of Ahmad's experiences of loss and struggle throughout his history. While he expresses a sense of satisfaction and safety in the United States, his past continues to encroach into the present. In light of his life history, as well as the context of reception in the historical moment of his resettlement, the imperious effect of the government on Ahmad's understanding of self and world come into sharper focus.

Ahmad begins our conversations by asserting a strong sense of belonging and welcome in the United States, informed by a community that treats him (and his family) as 'good,' hardworking, and deserving members of American society. As we spend more time together, however, he begins to confide that he worries a time may come when he and his family may no longer be welcome in the United States. During one interview he explains,

This [insecurity] is what makes life here difficult... I told you we are fighting here. We feel safe, we feel happy. But sometimes, with these decisions or something, you feel...it's difficult, to feel you did something wrong [being here].

Over time, his wariness becomes more palpable. "I wish the future will not be bad for us in this country," he sighs during another interview. "We are here, we are legal people. And we are so

welcomed here.” But this welcome, as the politics and public attitudes of the moment suggest, is not ubiquitous. That belongingness, on all scales and in all contexts, is conditional—a reality that while Ahmad does not explicitly acknowledge, becomes evident in his story of life in the United States.

Our understanding of Ahmad’s past, one in which self and existence were heavily mediated by a repressive and unrelenting regime, provides necessary context to better understand his negotiation of self and belonging in the United States. Taking into account this history, it is unsurprising that in our conversations he often speaks in vague terms with regard to the politics and policies of the 45th administration, even those that he fears may, someday, affect him directly. His experiences have enforced an understanding that, at best, his protests would do no good. At worst, they could result in peril. This history, coupled with the role of the American state as sole provider of ‘secure belonging’ through full, legal citizenship, I suggest, makes Ahmad particularly responsive to understandings and negotiations of a self framed through the lens of American politics, and related public discourse.

“We Did Not Cross the Sea”: Legality and Belonging in America

‘Securing’ our nation’s borders’ from ‘dangerous,’ ‘illegal’ immigrants was a cornerstone of both Trump’s platform and rallying cry during the 2016 election, and throughout his presidency. As a frequent target, tweets and retweets mentioning ‘illegals’ and ‘illegal immigration’ on his personal @realdonaldtrump Twitter account returned 196 results during his time in office (The American Presidency Project archives). While American politics has in the past often posed the issue of “illegal” immigration as one synonymous with Mexicans, the conflation of those entering legally (including those seeking asylum) and ‘illegally’ seems to have increased for all migrants under the Trump administration. National origin, Flores and Schachter (2018) find, is a powerful indicator for “socially illegality,” a term which frames illegality as a status based on socially recognized and personal characteristics; actual legal status is not considered. Though Mexicans were highly likely to be perceived as illegal,

perceptions of illegality were also high for Syrians in their study; Europeans and Asians were considered least suspect (Flores and Schachter 2018).

Ahmad often describes himself as “being legal” in our conversations. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the growing political focus on illegal immigration, everyday bordering activities, and the overall perceptions of the American public with regard to immigrants. In a 2015 survey, the most common response was “illegal” when respondents were asked what one word comes to mind when thinking about United States immigrants; “legality” was the third most common (Pew Research Center 2015).

As our conversations continue, his framing of self through the lens of legality becomes more transparent. These discussions, which often also address a sense of political insecurity in the United States, suggest that by underscoring his legality he is also claiming his ‘place’ within America by separating himself from other immigrants who, it is often argued, do not ‘belong.’ During our first meeting he references this only briefly,

Sometimes we feel pessimistic, with the political news. Because when we came here, we did not cross the sea. We [did] not come with the traffic, no. We came through a very heavy security measures. We met so many interviews. When we were brought here, we were brought by the IOM, which is [the] International Organization of Migration. So, we were legal. And when we got here, when we reached the New York airport, we were given papers. Legal papers, that we are legal immigrants.

While not mentioned specifically, in this discussion he employs common aspects of anti-immigrant positions that utilize legality to justify exclusion, and refutes their relevance to his circumstance; Ahmad and his family did not cross the sea, or drive across the southern border. In this discussion he also begins to hint at the connection between his legality, his deservingness, and his belonging in the United States. In a later interview he elaborates further,

and more explicitly tying his legality to his acceptance after an arduous approval process which further signifies the deserving nature of himself and his family:

I was asked this question by people. I said immigration here to the United States, it maybe happen in two ways. The legal way, and the illegal way. The legal way is through heavy procedures, heavy procedures. We did not come through the ocean. And it last years to come here. And they were so sure that we are good to come here. They said, 'You will be good people.' So, when we were here and we spoke to people, and they checked the family they said, 'Yeah, this is educated family.'

Similarly to his connection between his 'normalcy' and efforts to his welcome within his community, his discussions of himself as legal suggest that his sense of self as deserving is connected to this legality: not only does he belong because he is legal, but he and his family were admitted because they are 'good' and 'educated.' In other words, not only is he 'legal,' but he and his family were given legal status because they were vetted, their positive attributes were recognized by others, and they were deemed worthy of resettlement and integration into American society. The common themes of our discussions of his life in the United States and the subsequent inventory of his positive personal attributes—work and work ethic, self-sufficiency, well-liked in his community, legality—position him squarely on the side of the 'good' immigrant as defined in political and public discourse.

Both political rhetoric and media representations have been implicated in harmful stereotypes relating to immigrants and legal status. Flores and Schachter (2018:840) cite "the complexities and ambiguities of immigration law" in the stereotyping that creates perceptions of social illegality, which are then perpetuated by both politicians as well as the media. However, Alamillo, Haynes, and Madrid (2019) contend that, in terms of public attitudes, policy frames are more influential than variations in media coverage, with negative framing being more influential

than positive framing of immigrants. Regardless of where constructions of social illegality stem from, their effects are widespread.

Flores and Schachter (2018) argue that social illegality likely marks millions of people—including the undocumented, legal residents like Ahmad, and even citizens—in a variety of realms (including criminal justice, employment, housing, education, and even while existing in public at large). Similarly, Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) finds that everyday bordering practices, including those related to work and procuring housing, are frequently fed by racialized perceptions of individual illegality and often detrimental to even those with legal documentation. Bordering processes, as ‘top-down’ projects of governance, trickle down into everyday forms of bordering and subsequent negotiations of belonging—which, I would argue, are frequently intertwined with constructions of social illegality—across public spaces and within day-to-day interactions (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019).

While it is unclear from his narrative as to whether Ahmad has experienced any overt sense of being perceived as ‘socially illegal,’ his repeated assertions make clear that he has a sense of unease regarding, at minimum, an abstract public perception of his legal place in the United States. As we continue, we will explore other ways in which he underscores his deservingness in effort to stake his foothold of belonging in relationship to the state, and broader society.

‘Not Like Those Other Refugees’: Distinctions of Desirability and Deservingness

Assessments of deservingness are inherent in definitions of refugeehood, beginning with determinations of refugee status by governmental and intragovernmental authorities (Black 2006). These judgments only escalate for those seeking resettlement. Evaluations constructed on shifting moral grounds (Shiff 2020), as well as broader geopolitical considerations and estimations of ‘cultural’ and security risk (Scribner 2017) shape the politics of resettlement. But, these assessments are not only confined to the agents of the UNHCR, politicians, or the bureaucrats of state resettlement departments. The tensions between perceived vulnerability,

deservingness and desirability, and 'risk' to countries of resettlement and asylum proliferate throughout political discourse, media reports, and subsequent public opinions in those places in which newcomers make their homes. Giddens (1991) might argue that these risk assessments, and their subsequent effects on the mediated experience of the self in society, are a hallmark of modernity itself.

In an analysis of media portrayals of refugees and the refugee crisis in Germany, Holzberg, Kolbe, and Zaborowski (2020:547) argue that press coverage had the effect of projecting the "the source of the crisis... onto migration itself" thereby turning asylum into not a legal right, but one that must be 'earned.' It is, in effect, not enough to be perceived as non-threatening; one must be deemed 'worthy' of integration into the new nation. While the same findings have not (yet) been explicitly noted in analysis of American news coverage of national politics, I argue that a similar projection is detectable in many of the statements of Donald Trump (and like-minded politicians), such as those surrounding an "invasion" at the Southern border by "caravans of migrants," (see The White House 2018), and others previously discussed here.

We have previously seen the ways in which Ahmad employs his 'desirable' attributes to assert a position of belonging in his local community, and how his sense of community and successes have contributed to a sense of himself as one who is deserving. Ahmad's sense of deservingness in the United States is informed by his efforts to build a normal life through employment, and his sense of self as one who is normal, liked, and accepted by others.

As our interviews continue, Ahmad accentuates his deservingness through the juxtaposition of self to other, less perceptibly deserving and desirable refugees and immigrants in the United States. To do so Ahmad, in effect, appropriates the language of the political right to distinguish himself and his family from the image of those 'undeserving' as frequently portrayed by anti-immigrant rhetoric and attitudes: those who do not share their 'good' values; those who are reliant on the support of social services; and those unwilling to work and/or who

work in the informal economy, those who are not legal. Employing this charged language is, in effect, an escalation of his assertion of worth and belonging, as he understands it through the eyes of America.’ A conversation with both Ahmad and Maysa begins to illustrate this point. She recalls one of her vaccination appointments in the United States,

One of the nurses, he was a guy. He asked me, ‘Do you smoke?’

I said, ‘No. Never.’

He said, ‘Do you drink?’

I told him, ‘Never.’

‘Do you do drugs?’

I go, ‘Never.’”

She and Ahmad both begin to laugh as she delivers the punchline: “So [the nurse] says, ‘Why are you living?!!!’” Ahmad laughs and nods as she quickly continues,

So even the organization, the church, each time we met with them... the lady there she says, ‘Your family, you are very good family. You are very good family. You don’t ask for cigarettes. You don’t ask for money for liquors. There’s a lot of refugees...’

Ahmad interjects. “And we [aren’t] doing that for a purpose,” he assures me in a serious tone. They are, he explains to me later, “respected” people. “And respected people, they know their limits.” In another conversation he draws a starker contrast between himself, and some other refugees,

We [are] supposed not to say that, but we are loyal. We are loyal. We are honest with the people who are honest with us. We are working hard now, because we are honest. There are so many refugees here, they are not working. Or they are only depending on the social services, and

something like to go to take house from the social services, and they are not... Or working somewhere not doing taxes, no.²⁶

Relatedly, Ahmad often discusses the value he (and by extension, his family) can bring to the United States. In these conversations, he again often uses other refugees and immigrants as a point of comparison to reinforce his claim. These benefits are not only the result of his own efforts, but the futures he has enabled for his daughters and their future abilities to “serve the country.” Two are currently enrolled in university, with the younger two expected to follow the same path in the years to follow. He speaks of his daughters, stressing their success, their work ethic, and their desires to “be something.” One aims for a career in dentistry, another as a pharmacist. “Here, if we got the citizenship,” he argues, “it is good for us. And, it is good for the country.” He continues,

Maybe you are receiving thousands every day. But if you want to come to check, how many educated persons out of the thousands? How many, his son or his daughter will be a doctor? How many will go to be like [my daughter], to be a pharmacist. How many one?

As he lauds his and his family’s value, I often get the sense that he is preparing an argument for the day he is told to leave the United States, should it ever arrive.

There is little research (of which I am aware) that specifically addresses conceptions of, or negotiations of deservingness amongst refugees themselves. Gabriel and Harding (2009:137) noted that narratives highlighting typical measures of “success” in the stories of

²⁶ It seems pertinent to note that, across our conversations, I do not frequently get the sense that Ahmad considers himself to be ‘better than’ other refugees and immigrants. During our first interview, he not only suggests that I should also conduct interviews with undocumented Hispanic immigrants, but offers to see if he can make introductions from acquaintances. He also frequently stresses his desire to “help others,” particularly newcomers. In our final conversation (see Epilogue) he is emphatic about himself as one who does not discriminate on the basis of socioeconomic status and is not only willing but appreciates his ability to meet people ‘where they are’ to better understand their circumstance, and help when possible.

refugees they studied were often employed in a way that “allowed them to distance themselves from their refugee status.” Ahmad’s underscoring of his material successes and quality of life may be a similar attempt to separate his sense of self from his perceived notions of what it means to be a refugee.

It is worth noting that he never once referred to himself as a refugee during our conversations, other than in contrast to other refugees in such a way as to ‘put space’ between himself and other experiences of refugeehood. While Ahmad shares some similarities amongst these participants—the importance of providing for a good life for his children, the importance he places on community—there are considerable differences. Gabriel and Harding (2009) found that participants often framed their contributions and sense of self as ‘good refugees’ through the lens of activism; a sense of balance and respect for both native cultural traditions and those of their new countries was also particularly salient within these narratives.

Hetz (2021) also uncovered a ‘good refugee’ self-representation within refugee chronicles. Though the content of these representations varied somewhat across the two ethnic groups studied, sometimes drawing on group-specific negative portrayals and refuting them, both groups stressed the desire to integrate and to show that they were, in fact, ‘good refugees.’ Similar to Ahmad’s narrative, Hetz (2021) finds that the ‘othering’ of other refugees amongst participants is used to set them apart from those seen as undesirable, and to explain their ‘good treatment’ in comparison. This finding rings true in many aspects of Ahmad’s narrative, from his distinctions between self and ‘other refugees’ and in his discussions of community belonging. However, participants in Hertz’ (2021) study frequently relayed their positive treatment through an institutional lens, rather than a community one.

Beyond vulnerability or threat, economic productivity is often used to frame questions of worth and subsequent desirability for immigrants. Deservingness, as conceptualized by the state, is often qualified by economic prospects and (in)capacity for self-sufficiency (Maestri and Monforte 2020; Steensland 2006). Attitudes towards deservingness and self-sufficiency,

including who is capable of working toward it and who is deserving of aid, has remained a key debate in arguments related to broad governmental assistance in the United States (Steensland 2006) and specifically that which is provided to refugees and other immigrants (Yoo 2008). 'Good refugees' are seen as those that desire and are able to 'contribute,' a measure closely related to determinations of (economic) 'success' in integration (Gabriel and Harding 2009). Most recently, political and public discourse related to the 2019 so-called public charge rule put in place under the Trump administration, provides an example (see Homeland Security Department 2018). The ability to 'contribute' to the country economically, as evidenced by employment and lack of reliance on social services, extends beyond determinations of eligibility for resettlement and asylum, and into the experiences of everyday life for asylum seekers or those carving out new lives in resettlement.

Self-sufficiency and the ability and desire to contribute is, we have seen, a vital aspect of Ahmad's self representation. His employment history, his material successes, and his work ethic are all employed as testaments to his deservingness in the United States. Wernesjö (2020) found similar self-narratives centered around personal responsibility and work ethic amongst unaccompanied youth in Sweden, which were also used to contradict negative public perceptions. Ahmad's recounting similarly suggests that the stress on these positive attributes is informed by his notion of who is a 'good' refugee or immigrant in America, and who is not. Contrasting himself with these 'other' less deserving refugees by employing the 'conservative' language of the right is, for Ahmad, a clear way of refuting his likeness to a common (and undesirable) portrayal, and closing the gap between himself and the vision of worthiness and deserving painted by the common language of the government. It is not only a refusal to concede to an inaccurate and unbecoming stereotype, it is also an assertion of his worth and deservingness to belong.

Political Precarity and Precarious Belonging in America

Refugees become eligible to apply for United States citizenship after five years of residency. Ahmad, however, sometimes expresses worry that this opportunity may come to be delayed, or halted entirely, in our conversations in 2019. At unexpected times, his voice often pleading, he questions why he and his family were brought to the United States if they were, in fact, unwelcome and unwanted. “If they don’t want us they [are] supposed to say from the beginning—‘We will not take you,’” he says soberly. During another interview, he jokingly recalled a conversation with a friend, another refugee who asked if there had been a decision to delay citizenship for those in resettlement. He laughed as he recalled saying, “We are living here, I will not leave!” His laughter cut short, his tone quickly turns serious. “Where am I supposed to go now?”

At other times he speaks more plainly about these anxieties. “Sometimes when they speak now about immigration, something about citizenship or making a delay for citizenship, we feel so sorry. We feel so sorry for that,” he says quietly during a conversation in 2019. He speaks at length about his uneasiness as he continues,

This is one of the things that we are still thinking about. Me, as a father, I’m still sometimes feeling not safe. I wish this country will be my country, and that’s why I’m here. We sold our house, we brought our money here, we are starting to live a good life. When you hear something about that it’s frustrating. It’s frustrating. If you maybe do this, what we did here... it’s not that easy to sell your house and come here and to try to settle down, and then someone will say, ‘Oh you will not get the citizenship,’ ‘Oh the immigrants will be like that.’

There are so many things that sometimes you will feel not good about it. And it affects a lot. These things affects a lot. We wish that we will be okay in the future. And, we will be. My kids, I wish my kids will be safe.

When I think about the political situation, that the decisions are different from time to time... This is something unpleasant for me.

We came here legally and through a heavy situation, heavy procedures, security procedures. And now, just when you look at something, you are about to collapse. Why?... We don't wanna say, we are not the kind of people who blame the others. We don't blame anyone. But if you think you don't need me here, why you brought me here? Why you get me through these difficult processes?

Ahmad is largely satisfied and secure in his new life; his only fear in the present appears to be that of a future in which he and his family are no longer welcome in the United States. His past experience has attested to the power of the government to reach into the everyday and exert control over innumerable aspects of his experience, and the life possibilities that lie ahead. In his final era in Iraq, the necessity of ensuring he was not viewed as a threat, to anyone, became even clearer. In the wake of an American administration invested in anti-immigration sentiment and aiming to disable the very processes that provided him refuge in the United States, his experiences have shaped an interpretation of the moment which, quite understandably, calls his very place in America into question.

Belonging, Yuval-Davis et al. (2019:7) argue, "becomes articulated, formally structured, and politicized only when it is perceived to be under threat in some way." While this statement provides a clear lens through which we can understand the politics of belonging and related bordering processes of the nation-state, I suggest that, on the scale of the personal and with broad strokes, we can also use this notion to make further sense of Ahmad's narrative, and his negotiations of self, belonging, and deservingness in resettlement.

Despite the declarations of belonging situated early within Ahmad's American story, over time a profound anxiety—a sense of threat—becomes transparent as he questions the permanency of his place in the United States, and the possibility of an unanticipated and less

optimistic future for himself and his family. In the wake of his past, and the political and social moment of his resettlement, Ahmad is confronted with a new form of political precarity in this life, and a sense of precarious belonging in the United States. His story is, at its essence, one of the tensions between belonging and unbelonging in America, and the negotiations of self that occur in response as he seeks sanctuary in a new, yet often perceptibly unwelcoming, land.

Belonging is inherently an enactment of distinction used to carve out categories from a more complex social fabric. This carving out a place occurs cognitively, emotively, and viscerally. In the realm of the social and the self, belonging becomes a way of not only distinguishing groups and people, but positioning ourselves and others in alignment with constructed collectives existing on any number of scales. Immanent in these negotiations are boundary making and border maintenance (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019); to define a group some must exist beyond its boundaries, one can only belong through the exclusion of others. In making and enacting the everyday decisions of belonging, we come to understand ourselves through these relationships, both abstract and concrete, amongst others within the world (Jenkins 2014; May 2013; Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). These negotiations of where and with whom we belong, or desire to belong, are informed by our sense of self in the present and a perceived future; they also shape who we are, and who we will become (May 2013).

Our belongingness, however, is not only a product of our wants—it requires recognition on the part of others (May 2013; Noble 2005). In modernity, our selves are the reflexive products of a multitude of day-to-day decisions that inform and substantiate a sense of who we are (Giddens 1991). These choices and related behaviors produce and reproduce our orientations toward the world and others, and our senses of who we are. Our everyday choices and behaviors also bear the burden of putting forth a representation of ourselves to the world, one that (along with other subjective components) informs the understandings of others about who we are, their recognition of our (un)belonging, and their actions towards us as a result. In Ahmad's purview, his belonging in America has been invited, recognized, and earned through

his actions and who he *is*. Yet, it has also been disavowed by the government of the same country that provided its refuge, and broad swaths of the citizenry of which he hopes to become a part.

I suggest that, in the context of Ahmad's lived experience, his sense of who he is in the United States—as narrated through his themes of community, work and self-sufficiency, legality, and deservingness as defined through contrast to 'others'—is an effect of this 'precarious belonging' in America. The conditional nature of belonging, and a sense of uncertainty informed by his past context and present experience has, for Ahmad, informed an articulation of self which is structured through a negotiation of personal understandings and the broader social and political lens of America.

To put it plainly, his assertions of his acceptance and deservingness—evidence of his right to belong—are compelled by the sense that his belonging is also questioned. As alluded to by Holzberg et al. (2020), informed by a sense of risk the public discourse of migration in the West frequently rearticulates refuge as not a right, but something that must be 'proven,' that must be earned. Even after legal resettlement, the subsequent 'right to belong,' for many, remains in question by everyday acts of bordering, and must be continually evinced (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019). For many, even after citizenship, a sense of belonging may remain aspirational rather than realized (Hertz 2021). In the wake of this insecurity, Ahmad's life history provides a granular look at the ways in which he negotiates the interrogations of his 'belonging,' and the sense of self that evolves as it is defined, supported, and perhaps, clung to.

But what does it mean to 'belong' in relation to the state? Decades before Ahmad's birth, Hannah Arendt, herself intimately familiar with the experiences of refugeehood, argued that belonging within a political community was the fundamental human right, and one "without which no other rights can materialize" (1949:37). In a well-considered argument for granting citizenship to the displaced, Arendt (1949) attests that political belonging is requisite for the

protection, and in effect recognition, of all other 'human rights.' While not yet a citizen, Ahmad has legal belonging within the United States and a pathway to American citizenship.

Despite this legal tie, his sense of belonging remains tinged with precarity. If belonging is a feeling of comfort, of safety, of home and 'a place,' then legal status is surely vital to creating such an emotive state in relation to a new land. However, as Gowayed (2020:290) argues, it is also "insufficient" to produce a sense of full belonging, or of complete legal and physical safety, of complete security, particularly within this unique moment of resettlement.

During one conversation, I asked Ahmad whether he ever hoped to return to Iraq. "For visit," he replies. "I'm thinking about that. I [am] supposed to take the citizenship and take the passport maybe 2020. Whenever I get the passport, I think I will." In our conversations during the 45th presidential administration, it seemed that obtaining citizenship was, for Ahmad, the final step in achieving the sense of permanency and 'full belonging' that was lost to him years ago in Iraq. Whether citizenship will fulfill, and maintain this sense, remains to be seen.

Epilogue: Belonging in America, 2021 (and Beyond?)

After a contentious campaign between the incumbent Donald Trump and the democratic opposition, the 2020 presidential election left those on most all sides of the political spectrum holding their breaths. On November 7, 2020, four days after Election Day, the Associated Press called the race for the new President-elect, Joe Biden (Lemire, Miller, and Weissert 2020). Despite court challenges, recounts, and a riot at the nation's capital by Trump supporters and other instigators in a presumed attempt to delay the certification, Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46th President of the United States on January 20, 2021. In the days after the election, proponents for refugee resettlement and immigrants' rights were heartened by his campaign's

declaration to ‘re-open’ the United States to asylum-seekers and refugees, and to repair a broken immigration system.²⁷

In the months after inauguration, he increased the refugee admissions ceiling to 62,500 for FY 2021 and stated a goal of accepting 125,000 for 2022 (The White House 2021). It is also worth noting, however, that there were considerable expressions of disapproval in later months as the new administration backtracked on that original goal, and instead retained the 15,000 refugee cap put in place by the Trump administration (see International Rescue Committee 2021). This statement was later retracted but confusion remained, and admission numbers for FY 2021 were perhaps the lowest in the history of United States resettlement (see Migration Policy Institute 2021). At the time of writing, the Biden administration’s proposed admission numbers for FY 2022 reflect the 2022 goal set after inauguration (U.S. Department of State 2021).

In our first conversation after the election, in March 2021, I asked Ahmad, for the first time, explicitly about how he was feeling as a result of “everything that had happened” in the past months and in the wake of the new administration. While perceptibly vague, as always, he told me that they were “feeling more comfortable, more stable.” They have not yet been granted American citizenship, but have begun the process.

When we met over coffee several months later, I could not help but notice a perhaps small, but perceptible, change in his words and tone as we made small talk, discussing his life over the last few months, his children, and his hopes for them. In contrast to his assertions in prior conversations that they “are [an] American family now,” we now speak about the beauty of the Arabic language, Islam, and he speaks for the first time about hoping that his daughters

²⁷ See Biden Harris. 2021. “The Biden Plan for Securing Our Values as a Nation of Immigrants.” JoeBiden.com

retain a sense of their Iraqi culture. Later, he tells me he is thinking about pursuing a graduate degree. "I think this is personal," he says. He continues,

I think it is something inside me and I want to do it. But sometimes I think, what to do with it? I'm about to be 60 now. So what's the use of that, I have a lot to do. But it's still... I have that spirit... I'm trying to get a chance, and I don't know when to get it but this is a hope."

While he still laments what was lost, and our talk turns to the many different kinds of 'loss of life' in Iraq, he speaks of the future now in a more certain, concrete sense, rather than abstract hopes. His sense of self, both past and present, is still bound to persistence. But, there are no comparisons drawn to stake a claim of deservingness in this conversation. Instead, he draws from examples of his past to craft a continuity with his experience in the present. Later, in telling me a story about his childhood, he highlights his lack of concern and disregard of a person's socioeconomic status or position. "I don't mind [sitting] on the ground to talk to a person who needs that," he says.

While I suspect that, given his history, Ahmad will likely always experience some anxieties when confronted by anti-immigrant rhetoric and particularly that articulated by those in power, our post-election conversations about life in America suggest the sense of precarity, and the need to prove his belonging, have dissipated. Despite his still continued liminal, permanent resident status, it seems that the shifting social and political context of America may have finally given to Ahmad something he has been seeking for decades, something we all deserve.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

With this thesis I aimed to explore how understandings of the world and being in the world may be affected by refugeehood, and what negotiations of self may occur in response. Though primarily focused on the post-resettlement experience, I acknowledged that not only do our histories shape our present, but that recognizing change over time and across contexts requires consideration of lived experiences both before and after arrival in the United States. To that end, and to best address my research inquiry, I employed the life history method to deeply explore the ways in which negotiations of self and world are influenced by the resettlement process.

Important themes emerged within Ahmad's post-resettlement story of self: the value of community acceptance; and, the roles of perceived 'normalcy,' work and self-sufficiency, and legality in crafting a sense of his deservingness in response to uncertainty. I suggest that many of these negotiations of the 'deserving self' are, for Ahmad, the effect of a 'precarious belonging' within the United States due to his legal-yet-liminal status as a permanent resident. Within his history, we can see the influence of both past and present, as he pursues this new life and aligns himself with others in this new existence.

Summary of Ahmad's Life History

Ahmad's life history reveals the reflexive self-making of one experience of resettlement, and the multidimensional nature of belonging and unbelonging in America. In his history, we find a self negotiating the boundaries of belonging in relationship to the local community and American society at large. His belonging, in his purview, has been earned in three fundamental ways. First, through the persecution and losses of his past; second, by his perseverance through that history and the struggles of resettlement; and third, his commitment to be a 'normal person' who has created a 'normal life' in America. Within his self-narrative, his day-to-day experiences attest to his acceptance, and legitimize his deservingness. The way he perceives

he is 'seen' by his community, and his interpretation of self as deserving are mutually reinforcing. He belongs because he is worthy, and his belonging is evidence of his worthiness.

But, within his story, we also find that Ahmad's sense of belonging in America is more fragile than he would like to admit. His negotiations of self are mediated by the social, historical, and political contexts of the present in the United States, and of his past in Iraq. His history has instilled a wariness in expressions of government dissent, which is notable (in its absence) within his narrative, and time and again confirmed the frequent cruelties of those in power and their deleterious effects on everyday lives. His past attests to not only the influence of those in power to mediate one's ways of being in the world, but also the importance of aligning oneself with the expectations and inclinations of those in power. Moreover, Ahmad arrived in the United States at a particular historical moment: in the throes of the contentious 2016 presidential campaign, and the subsequent election of a vocal opponent of immigrants and refugees who further legitimized a vocal base sharing his vision for America. While the American government does not display the same power or cruelty of the one he grew up with, his words suggest that the imperative to present a self which is 'in line' with the expectations of those in power remains. It is little wonder that Ahmad remains reticent and wary of adverse political decisions, and the effects they could have on the future of his family.

Despite his status as a permanent resident, Ahmad's story suggests a sense of 'precarious belonging' exacerbated by the social, political, and historical contexts of his past as well as the present. This is, for example, evidenced in his decision not to undertake international travel until he has an American passport; leaving, even temporarily, in his perception may be a forfeiture of his 'place' in the United States. But it is also expressed as a more ephemeral sense of unease, of insecurity. As our conversations continue, his expressions of wariness come with greater frequency. He worries that he and his family may not always be welcome, his opportunity for citizenship may be delayed or revoked; or there may be other 'political decisions' against them.

As our conversations continue, he appropriates the language of the conservative right to tell the story of who he, and his family are, in the United States, and to further stake his claim within the bounds of 'normal' American society. These negotiations of self—one who is 'legal,' one who works hard unlike 'other' refugees and immigrants, one who is self-sufficient and successful—positions him in contrast to those deemed 'undesirable' and attests to his acceptance of his perceived notions of American life and its people. These negotiations of deservingness are a stark yet unsurprising response, in light of his past, to a new sense of precarity wrought by the politics of the moment and the social context of his arrival. His narrative of self in this era is, in effect, a bulwark against rejection and a means of asserting his belonging, both in the United States and amongst its people.

Strengths and Limitations

The life history contained here is only “one of a million stories,” as Ahmad often reminded me during our conversations. Though not generalizable to the whole of the experience of refugeehood, the vast complexity and differences amongst refugee populations is far too broad to be tackled meaningfully by any one narrative; there is not singular uniformity in the ways of being in the world as a refugee. From the beginning, I hoped to add to the literature a more granular understanding of a journey of refugeehood and resettlement, heavily informed by the perceptions of those with intimate, experiential knowledge of the subject.

A considerable body of literature exists in the social sciences addressing a variety of realms related to the migration experience. There is considerable research which aims to theorize the refugee regime and/or the role and influence of macro-level factors, such as the state, in refugee determination and the resettlement process. There are studies of the refugee experience and health. In addition, there are inquiries into acculturation, assimilation, and immigrant and refugee outcomes. For the latter, in the United States, recent literature frequently focuses on Latinx immigrants and/or those of the “the 1.5 generation” or second-generation

experience in particular. Based on my review of the literature, to my knowledge, there are limited inquiries providing a nuanced view of the lived experiences of refugeehood, particularly within the American context.

As with any method, the life history does have its limitations. Here, the strengths of the life history approach in gaining a depth of perception of a life necessarily limits the breadth of this study. In addition, the extensive interaction required to carry out this project limited possible participants to those with reasonable English proficiency; as many refugees are not English speaking upon arrival, this also limited the understanding of the refugee experience to a small subset of those experiencing resettlement in the United States. Most obviously, the limitations of scope and language require further acknowledgement that the findings may not apply to considerable swaths of the refugee population. In other words, in order to gain a more detailed, deeper understanding of a life, our ability to better understand the lives of refugees at large is necessarily limited.

Though I am certain Ahmad's story will not resonate with the lived experiences of all who have walked this path, this was not its intent or purpose. This thesis aimed to provide an in-depth, close-up view of one experience of refugeehood and resettlement. Furthermore, by employing the life history we began to understand the existential *changes* in self and world that occur in resettlement by considering the evolution of both across borders and time. This is to say, that in taking a more continuous view of the before, during, and after of refugeehood we can better understand how resettled refugees recreate or refine their ways of understanding themselves within this new life.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that this study, in many ways, provides a deep view of the experience of resettlement as situated within a particular moment in the United States. While this may be a limitation it is, in my view, also a strength by providing a greater understanding of the influence of political contexts not only on refugee admissions, but on those who are already in the throes of acclimating to a new life. Ahmad entered the country in the

midst of a particularly divisive and heated campaign for the 2016 Presidential Election, which was followed by the election of a president with an unprecedented anti-immigrant and anti-refugee views. While many aspects of refugee resettlement and social attitudes towards refugees in America have remained at least somewhat consistent across wide spans of time, Ahmad's entry and introduction into American society came at a particular historical moment. His experience of resettlement, just like that of any refugee, was situated within a specific context. In other words, his understanding of self and his relationship to this new world are situated not only in his history, but in ways unique to this particular era of *our* history.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is my hope that this life history may open up new ways of thinking about what we know, and what we think we know about the refugee, and more broadly, the immigrant experience. It is vital to remember that the ways newcomers understand themselves in this new life, the decision they make regarding who they are and wish to become, and with whom to align themselves to achieve these aims, are all mediated by social experience. Initially, I admit I found some aspects of Ahmad's narrative and sense of self in the United States surprising, disheartening, and even disappointing. Over time, however, I came to recognize that his narrative is grounded not only by his past in Iraq, or his own perceptions, but in the social world which he now resides. His narrative is more than a statement of self—for better or for worse, Ahmad's story says just as much about him as it does about American society, and the realities of resettlement in the United States.

While this thesis adds to our understanding of the construction of self and worlds for those experiencing resettlement, there is still much to be discovered along this general line of inquiry. As we know from a robust body of literature, including the works of Mead, Giddens, and others, and as we've seen in Ahmad's own experiences, our selves are reflexively made, and change over time. This contribution is only a discrete patch in the long *durée* of one life, within

one specific socio-historical moment. Additional longitudinal studies employing the life history as method, or other phenomenological approaches, would add to our understanding of the changing trajectory of self-making over time through this sustained process of resettlement. Long-term studies, particularly those aimed at gaining an in-depth view of refugee perceptions before, during, and after pursuit of American citizenship would also add considerably to our understanding of the influence and role of concepts of legality in refugees' ways of being in the world, and its possible impacts on sense of belonging and security.

Further research with other subsets of the refugee population would add considerably to currently known about their understandings of self and relationship to American society at large. Particularly, lines of inquiry with participants with different national histories and experiences of refugeehood, and different characteristics that promote or inhibit integration, would further inform our understanding of the role of the social in shaping the experience of self and world in resettlement. Relatedly, such studies could help us to better understand to what extent themes of legality and deservingness hold true for the refugee population in the United States at large.

Finally, as mentioned several times, this thesis speaks to resettlement within a very particular moment. Comparative studies pursuing a longitudinal approach, analyzing the reconstruction of self in resettlement across different national contexts, and/or within different socio-political contexts in the United States, would also add considerably to the literature. Such research would extend our understanding of the themes found within Ahmad's history, and their influences on the perceptions of other selves that come to call the United States home.

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