

## Refugees from Iraq in Buffalo



*Please note that this is a rough-and-ready guide, and that these facts will not be applicable to all Iraqi refugees that you meet.*

### **Background: Ongoing Conflict in Iraq**

The country of Iraq suffers from war and terrorism on a daily basis. Currently the population of Iraq is approximately 28 million, of whom about 75% are Arab, 17% are Kurds and the remainder mostly Armenians, Assyrians and Turks.<sup>1</sup> The turmoil in Iraq includes violent disputes among Sunni Muslim and Shi'ite Muslim; persecution due to political allegiance; and targeting of vulnerable populations, such as women, by militias and insurgents.<sup>2</sup>

Over two million Iraqis have relocated outside of the country to Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon and Turkey. Unlike other refugee groups, Iraqi refugees typically have not spent much time in refugee camps.

Since 2003, New York State has resettled 2,614 Iraqi refugees, including 391 in the 2013 fiscal year. Many of these have been resettled in Erie County.

## Cultural Attributes

### *Religious Traditions and Belief Systems*

Islam is the religion of approximately 95% of the Iraqi population.<sup>3</sup> As a result, Islamic beliefs and customs influence much of everyday behavior, including family life.<sup>4</sup> The Islamic tradition prohibits the consumption of alcohol, although it is not uncommon for Iraqi individuals to partake. Specific rituals for meat preparation are prescribed in the Koran. Many Iraqi individuals prefer to purchase meat from *halal* butchers who understand and follow these traditions.<sup>5</sup> Ramadan, a month-long Islamic holiday, is a time for fasting from daybreak to sunset. It oftentimes involves prayer and meditation and is considered the holiest month of the Islamic year.

<b>The Five Pillars of Islam</b>
Shahadah: profession of faith in God
Salah: prayer towards Makkah, Islam's holiest city
Zakat: almsgiving, service to God
Sawm: fasting during the holy month of Ramadan
Hajj: the pilgrimage to Makkah

### *Social and Familial Values*

Family is at the center of society.<sup>6</sup> One's family typically indicates status. The culture is largely patriarchal in nature,<sup>7</sup> with the father having the ultimate authority and responsibility, although the mother-in-law often has a strong force of persuasion.<sup>8</sup>

Protection of women is a central tenet of Islamic society, indicating that a woman is loved and valued, though this may be seen as oppressive to Western eyes.<sup>9</sup> Women have a great deal of opportunities in Iraq when compared to other Arabic countries. Many Iraqi women are well-educated and have held jobs in high public office.<sup>10</sup>

A household includes much extended family, as women typically move in with their husband's family once married. Most marriages are arranged. Women generally do not take the surname of their husband.<sup>11</sup>

### *Language, Literacy and Education*

Many immigrants and refugees from Iraq are well-educated and highly trained; before the Gulf War in 1991, Iraq had one of the best educational systems in the Middle East. The wars have resulted in lower school enrollment, though most adults do have at least basic reading and writing skills in Arabic (spoken by approximately 77% of Iraqis) and in various dialects.<sup>12</sup> The various dialects may cause miscommunication, and specific dialects must be taken into consideration when an interpreter is hired.

English proficiency varies widely among Iraqi individuals.<sup>13</sup> English knowledge is largely dependent upon access to education in Iraq. Individuals are more likely to have the ability to read English than to speak it. The variation of word order in English is often confusing for native Arabic speakers because word order does not change in the Arabic language.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Employment Skills and Experiences***

Common skills and crafts among Iraqis include:<sup>15</sup>

- Shop-owners
- Traders
- Journalists
- Businesspeople
- Medical professionals
- Employees at non-profits

However, these individuals often find it difficult to land employment, despite their education or professional experience. Often, education credentials attained in other countries are not recognized in the US; therefore, many well-educated Iraqi citizens lose years of educational achievement upon moving to the US.<sup>16, 17</sup>

### **Medical and Healthcare Information**

The 2003 war has caused the Iraqi healthcare system to deteriorate.<sup>18</sup> Because of this failing security, both patients and doctors fear hospitals.<sup>19</sup> The large number living in poverty (nearly a third of the population) puts additional stress on the healthcare system; nearly half of Iraqi children face malnutrition.

Among refugees in the US, psychological distress is a major concern; many individuals face anxiety in the form of panic attacks in unfamiliar places.<sup>20</sup> In addition, refugees from Iraq have low rates of vaccination among their children, high rates of diarrhea among young children, and increasing number of cancer-related deaths and many concerns resulting from war-related injuries.<sup>21</sup>

### **Resettlement Experiences**

**In working with refugees, it is important to bear in mind that symptoms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) are common, due to past experiences such as torture, imprisonment, violence and interrogation. In addition, the loss or separation of families may add to the difficulties in adjusting to the new culture.**

Feedback from Iraqi refugee individuals has been used to identify several common goals for resettlement in the United States:

- Freedom from violence and oppression<sup>22</sup>
- Living in a country that protects the human rights of its people<sup>23</sup>
- More opportunities for education

- Improved healthcare<sup>24</sup>
- Stability and security for the family and their future<sup>25</sup>
- Hopeful future for their children

However, relocation to the US causes feelings of loss as well.<sup>26</sup>

- Loss of family members and friends
- Loss of home, country, culture, traditions
- Loss of educational credentials

## **Local Resources**

### **Iraqi American Society, Inc. (IAS)**

650 Robin Rd, Buffalo, NY 14228

*Established in 2010 by the Iraqi community to provide culturally appropriate services for the Iraqi and Arabic speaking population.*

### **WNY Muslim Association**

4011 Bailey Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14226

*WNYMuslims serves the Western New York community by creating awareness, encouraging diversity, and providing service. We empower Muslims and non-Muslims with the means to voice, connect, and contribute through creative media.*

### **Shish Kabab Express**

1207 Hertel Ave, Buffalo, NY 14216

*Iraqi restaurant opened in fall 2010 by a former refugee client of International Institute of Buffalo.*

### **International Institute of Buffalo (IIB)**

864 Delaware Ave, Buffalo, NY 14209

iib@iibuff.org (716)883-1900

*“The IIB seeks to strengthen Western New York by assisting refugees and immigrants to become independent, informed and contributing members of the community, and by promoting and supporting cultural competence, multiculturalism and global connectedness throughout the region.” The IIB offers translation and interpretation services.*

### **Catholic Charities (CC)**

20 Herkimer St. Buffalo, NY 14213

(716) 842-0270

*“Our Resettlement clients arrive in the United States through the auspices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS). Pre- and post-arrival services such as assistance with housing, food, clothing and employment are provided.”*

**Journey’s End Refugee Services, Inc. (JERS)**

2495 Main St #317, Buffalo, NY 14214  
(716) 882-4963

*JERS “provides refugees with the resources and support they need to become successful, active and contributing members of the Western New York Community.”*

**Jewish Family Services (JFS)**

70 Barker St, Buffalo, NY 14209  
(716) 883-1914

*Jewish Family Service assists families new to the US during the difficult transition to the American way of life. JFS provides employment services, ESL training, assistance in acquiring health care and social support services as well as public school enrollment and mental health support.*

**Jericho Road Community Health Center**

184 Barton St., Buffalo, NY 14213  
(716)-348-3000

*Jericho Road offers a variety of health services to low-income and refugee families. The services range from healthcare for new mothers, to general case management, support in filling out forms, ESL education or educational support for a range of ages.*

**Coordinated Refugee/Asylee Legal Services (The CRLS Project)**

237 Main Street, Suite 1015, Buffalo, NY 14203  
(716)853-3087

*A collaboration of legal service providers to support immigrants and refugees with civil and immigration legal services.*

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> "Iraq Population 2014." World Population Review. October 19, 2014. Accessed February 25, 2015. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/iraq-population/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Selmer, Ashley. "The Sunni-Shia Divide in Iraq." BBC News. June 21, 2014. Accessed February 25, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27945271>.
- <sup>3</sup> Khadduri, Majid. "Iraq." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. September 8, 2014. Accessed February 25, 2015. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293631/Iraq/232258/Arabs>.
- <sup>4</sup> Id.
- <sup>5</sup> Ranard, Donald, ed. "Refugees from Iraq: Their History, Cultures, and Background Experiences." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*, 2008. Accessed February 25, 2015. [www.culturalorientation.org](http://www.culturalorientation.org).
- <sup>6</sup> Id.
- <sup>7</sup> Id.
- <sup>8</sup> Id.
- <sup>9</sup> Id.
- <sup>10</sup> Id.
- <sup>11</sup> Id.
- <sup>12</sup> Khadduri, Majid. "Iraq." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. September 8, 2014. Accessed February 25, 2015. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/293631/Iraq/232258/Arabs>.
- <sup>13</sup> Ranard, Donald, ed. "Refugees from Iraq: Their History, Cultures, and Background Experiences." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*, 2008. Accessed February 25, 2015. [www.culturalorientation.org](http://www.culturalorientation.org).
- <sup>14</sup> Id.
- <sup>15</sup> Id.
- <sup>16</sup> <http://cronkitenewsonline.com/2010/12/arizonas-iraqi-refugees-struggle-to-find-work-in-professions-they-left-behind/>
- <sup>17</sup> Fandrich, Christine. "Refugee Resettlement in America: The Iraqi Refugee Experience in Upstate, NY." *Cairo Papers on Migration and Refugees* 1 (2012). Accessed February 25, 2015. [http://www.aucegypt.edu/GAPP/casar/Documents/Refugee Resettlement in America The Iraqi Refugee Experience in Upstate New York.pdf](http://www.aucegypt.edu/GAPP/casar/Documents/Refugee%20Resettlement%20in%20America%20The%20Iraqi%20Refugee%20Experience%20in%20Upstate%20New%20York.pdf).
- <sup>18</sup> Ranard, Donald, ed. "Refugees from Iraq: Their History, Cultures, and Background Experiences." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*, 2008. Accessed February 25, 2015. [www.culturalorientation.org](http://www.culturalorientation.org).
- <sup>19</sup> Id.
- <sup>20</sup> Id..
- <sup>21</sup> Id..
- <sup>22</sup> Sirkeci, Ibrahim. "War in Iraq: Environment of Insecurity and International Migration." *International Migration* 43, no. 4 (2005). Accessed February 25, 2015. [http://www.academia.edu/204386/War\\_in\\_Iraq\\_environment\\_of\\_insecurity\\_and\\_international\\_migration](http://www.academia.edu/204386/War_in_Iraq_environment_of_insecurity_and_international_migration).
- <sup>23</sup> Id. [http://www.academia.edu/204386/War\\_in\\_Iraq\\_environment\\_of\\_insecurity\\_and\\_international\\_migration](http://www.academia.edu/204386/War_in_Iraq_environment_of_insecurity_and_international_migration).
- <sup>24</sup> Ranard, Donald, ed. "Refugees from Iraq: Their History, Cultures, and Background Experiences." *Cultural Orientation Resource Center*, 2008. Accessed February 25, 2015. [www.culturalorientation.org](http://www.culturalorientation.org).
- <sup>25</sup> Sirkeci, Ibrahim. "War in Iraq: Environment of Insecurity and International Migration." *International Migration* 43, no. 4 (2005). Accessed February 25, 2015. [http://www.academia.edu/204386/War\\_in\\_Iraq\\_environment\\_of\\_insecurity\\_and\\_international\\_migration](http://www.academia.edu/204386/War_in_Iraq_environment_of_insecurity_and_international_migration).
- <sup>26</sup> Fandrich, Christine. "Refugee Resettlement in America: The Iraqi Refugee Experience in Upstate, NY." *Cairo Papers on Migration and Refugees* 1 (2012). Accessed February 25, 2015. [http://www.aucegypt.edu/GAPP/casar/Documents/Refugee Resettlement in America The Iraqi Refugee Experience in Upstate New York.pdf](http://www.aucegypt.edu/GAPP/casar/Documents/Refugee%20Resettlement%20in%20America%20The%20Iraqi%20Refugee%20Experience%20in%20Upstate%20New%20York.pdf).

This fact sheet is one in a series of “snap shots” of Buffalo’s immigrant and refugee populations, made possible by a grant from the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. They are free of charge at [www.ppgbuffalo.org/publications](http://www.ppgbuffalo.org/publications).

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