

Refugee Families from Iraq

This backgrounder provides general cultural information, while recognizing that every family is unique and that cultural practices will vary by household and by generation. Several Iraqi community leaders were interviewed for this backgrounder. While this resource provides general information, it is best to get to know each family and learn their unique characteristics; whenever possible, ask members of the community about different cultural practices.

The majority of Iraqis will have had some experience with Western-style living, and are well acquainted with urban lifestyles. This knowledge promotes quick adaptation to life in the U.S.

Practice Tip:

In keeping with the high value placed on respect, use formal titles with adults (Mr., Mrs., Ms.). Do not use first names unless invited to do so or given permission.



Background

Over the last 30 years more than 105,000 Iraqi refugees have been resettled to the United States (U.S. Dept. of State, 2012). The U.S. resettled over 12,000 Iraqi refugees in 2012, and the flow of Iraqi refugees is expected to continue at a steady pace.

Iraqi refugees awaiting resettlement often stay in neighboring countries for several years during the resettlement process. They may endure harsh living conditions, over-crowding, homelessness, and limited access to education, medical care, and other critical services.

Culture and Religion

Iraqis are comprised of many different ethnic groups, the largest of which are the Iraqi Arabs (75 - 80%). Iraqi Kurds represent 15 - 20% of the population. The remainder of the population is comprised of a variety of groups, including Turkomen, Armenians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans. Christians comprise approximately 3% of the population (Ghareeb, et. al., p. 5).

The main language spoken by Iraqis is Arabic, although there is some variation based on ethnic group. The second language is typically English, which is commonly taught in schools from a young age. The English proficiency of Iraqi refugees will range from basic to fluent.

Although 97% of Iraqis are Muslim and practice Islam (Ghareeb, et. al., p. 5), a disproportionately high number of Iraqi Christians are represented in the population resettled in the United States. In fiscal year 2012, over 40% of resettled Iraqis were members of Christian minority groups, over 50% were Sunni or Shi'ite Muslims, and the remainder were from other Iraqi minority groups (U.S. Dept. of State, 2012).

There are many dietary restrictions related to religious practice; these should be considered when working with Iraqi refugees. Muslims do not eat pork, consume alcohol or eat non-halal (Islamic process of slaughtering animals) meat.

Practice Tip:

Programs should offer non-pork food alternatives on menus and be mindful of food containing gelatin made from pork, such as jello, marshmallows, some yogurts, and frosted cereals.

There are five "pillars" of Islam: 1) the Islamic creed, 2) five daily prayers, 3) fasting during Ramadan, 4) charitable giving, and 5) the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime. Muslims observe Ramadan for one month every year, during which they abstain from eating and drinking between sunrise and sunset everyday. Patterns of life can change significantly, as more activities are conducted during the evening hours after the fast has been broken. At the end of Ramadan, Muslims celebrate Eid al Fitr, a three-day celebration. During this holiday, children will likely stay home with their families rather than attend school. The timing of Ramadan varies every year, as it is linked to the lunar rather than the solar calendar.

Practice Tip:

Programs should try to avoid scheduling key events during Ramadan.

Islam is an influential force in the daily lives of Iraqis and affects all components of everyday life on both a personal and public level. For example, while Iraqi Christians are not subject to Islamic dietary rules, consumption of pork or alcohol is not common.

Visiting an Iraqi household will typically involve the sharing of food and an invitation for a repeat visit. Family is the center of Iraqi daily life, and an individual's social status tends to be determined by the standing of his or her family.

Family and Community

Iraqi society is patriarchal. Fathers and male siblings tend to make more decisions than their female counterparts. In traditional homes, there is typically a specific area or room reserved for men and a separate area for women. Traditional families also tend to have extended families living together, sharing space and responsibility. In re-

cent years, however, there has been a move toward more nuclear family living.

Practice Tip:

Iraqi women traditionally use their father's full name as their last name. Consequently, children may not have the same last name as their mother.

Although Iraqi women enjoyed a high level of equality within Iraqi society, the ability of women to access this equality depended on a variety of factors, including familial socio-economic status and specific family beliefs.

In traditional families, marriages are arranged by parents, and preferred marriage partners will come from within the same ethnic group. While divorce is legal under Islamic law, it is not common and children tend to remain with the father.

Practice Tip:

Due to gender boundaries, women may prefer interacting with female service providers.

Child-Rearing and Child Development

Children are highly valued within Iraqi society, and large families are common. Traditional child-rearing practices lead to fundamentally different upbringings for boys and girls. The end result is that boys may spend more time in the outside world, while girls may spend more time in the home. However, all children are taught that dignity, honor, reputation, and respect for elders are important values.

Iraqi parents may believe that when mothers work outside the home, children may not get the attention they need to thrive.

"In Iraq, I spent more time with my children; now I cannot. It seems that children have too much freedom here. In Iraq, children have limited freedom. They are expected to listen to their parents, to not talk back, but here I see children talking back to their parents and the parents don't do anything about it." (BRYCS, Parenting Conversation: Dina)

Guidance and Discipline

In Iraq, most parents use some physical discipline raising their children. Parents may not address undesirable behavior if they do not know how to replace corporal punishment, or if the father was the traditional disciplinarian in what are now female-headed households.

Practice Tip:

Iraqi parents may welcome discussions of effective methods for guiding and disciplining children.

Traditionally, teachers within Iraq played a significant disciplinary role, and parents may have the expectation that this will be the case in the U.S. as well. Iraqis stress that educational programming for children needs to encourage respect and listening to teachers.

School and Education

There is a preference among Iraqis for keeping young children at home with family or friends until the children are school-age. Parents may feel concerned at the thought of putting their children in the hands of strangers. These concerns may provide an opportunity to promote family engagement and volunteering in a child's program. However, education is highly valued, and informing parents of the link between a solid early childhood education and future success in school will be an important factor in drawing parents to EHS/HS programming.

Parental engagement is limited in Iraqi schools. This lack of involvement does not indicate parental disinterest in their children's education, but rather a respect for teachers and the system of education.

Many Iraqi families may be used to an educational system with high academic standards but low resources. A significant number of Iraqis have university degrees in professional fields. Prior to the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, Iraq was a regional educational center, with nationals from other countries in the region traveling to Iraq to complete specialized education at a high level.

Practice Tip:

Parents may expect to be engaged with learning activities at home, but they may need personal contact or invitations to participate in on-site activities.

Health and Mental Health

Iraqi refugees will not have conditions typical to refugees living in camp situations (e.g., health problems associated with unclean water, inadequate food, and congested housing). Rather, Iraqi refugees have a variety of chronic conditions typically found in Western societies, such as diabetes, chronic heart conditions, obesity, a variety of cancers, as well as depression and anxiety.

Traditionally, there has been very limited preventive health care management for Iraqi families. Medical services in pre-war Iraq were readily available, and Iraqi refugees in the U.S. have expressed surprise at the difficulty in scheduling medical appointments for immediate health concerns.

The following health issues should be considered:

- *Low vaccination rates:* According to UNICEF data from 2009, 31% of Iraqi children had not been vaccinated for measles or polio.
- *High cancer rates for children and adults:* This is typically attributed to environmental (agricultural) toxins and biohazards attributed to long years of technologically advanced warfare.
- *High levels of war-related injuries:* War-related injuries include both physical harm (i.e., amputated limbs) and mental suffering (post-traumatic stress disorder). (Regester, 2011)

Mental health conditions are highly stigmatized within Iraqi culture. Families often go to extreme lengths to ensure that these conditions are kept hidden from the greater community. Mental health care might only be sought in extreme cases, in which long-term institutionalization is the end result.

Practice Tip:

Mental health stigma can be avoided by using prevention, wellness, and stress-reduction programming.

Community Leadership

Iraqi families tend to operate in a community-based culture, and they maintain close relationships with friends, neighbors, and family members. Religious institutions are a critical community organization. Social connections are built through constant communication, often in person. Iraqis may find the U.S. method of communication via phone to be somewhat alien and unfriendly. Thus, in-person communication is preferable.

Resources and References

BRYCS

- "Head Start Collaboration." <http://www.brycs.org/head-start-collaboration.cfm>
- Highlighted Resources—Iraqi Refugees. <http://www.brycs.org/clearinghouse/Highlighted-Resources-Iraqi-Refugees.cfm>
- "Parenting Interviews" [Farah, Suzan, Dina and Toma—Iraqi Parents]. http://www.brycs.org/aboutRefugees/parenting_interviews.cfm

Other Resources

- Central Intelligence Agency. (August 24, 2012). Iraq. *World Factbook*. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>
- Chapman, Shelby. (n.d.) *Iraqi Refugees: A Guide for Health Care Workers*. <http://www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite?blobcol=urldata&blobheadername1=Content-Disposition&blobheadername2=Content-Type&blobheadervalue1=inline%3B+filename%3D%22Iraqi+Refugees.pdf%22&blobheadervalue2=application%2Fpdf&blobkey=id&blobtable=MungoBlobs&blobwhere=1251811823570&ssbinary=true>
- Ghareeb, E., et al. (October 2008). *Refugees from Iraq: Their History, Culture, and Background Experiences*. Center for Applied Linguistics. <http://www.culturalorientation.net/content/download/1340/7833/version/4/file/Refugees+from+Iraq.pdf>
- Center for Victims of Torture. (2008). Iraqi Refugees. <http://healtorture.org/content/iraqi-refugees>
- Human Rights First. (December 2010). *Living in Limbo: Iraqi Refugees and U.S. Resettlement*. <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/Living-in-Limbo-Summary.pdf>

- Regester, K., et al. (2011). Iraqi Refugee Health Cultural Profile. *Ethnomed*. www.ethnomed.org/culture/iraqi
- U.S. Department of State, Refugee Processing Center. <http://wrapsnet.org/>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, links to State Refugee Coordinators and Mutual Assistance Associations. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/orr-funded-programs-key-contacts>

Video / DVD:

- Center for Applied Linguistics. (2010). *A New Day, and Be Who You Are*. <http://calstore.cal.org/store/p-194-refugee-families-youth-videos-a-new-day-be-who-you-are-dvd-in-english.aspx>
- Nashville Public Television. (2009). *Next Door Neighbors—Little Kurdistan, USA*. <http://wnpt.org/productions/next-doorneighbors/kurds/index.html>

Acknowledgements

This publication is a collaboration between Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS) and the Head Start National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness (NCCLR). BRYCS staff conceived and supervised the development of this publication, together with the NCCLR, who provided substantial support and input. We are grateful to Dina Dajani for researching and developing this resource, to Susan Schmidt for her editing skills, and to multiple staff and community members for their review and input, including Jeralda Hattar, Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan; Ahmed Abdalla, Migration and Refugee Services, USCCB (MRS/USCCB); and the refugee processing and resettlement staff of MRS/USCCB. Map courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.