

Iraqi Refugees

A Guide for Health Care Workers



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How To Use This Presentation

This presentation is designed to give a general overview of Iraqi culture for individuals working in the healthcare field. It is not intended to be a full account of the culture and beliefs of all Iraqi immigrants.

It is important to note that the information contained in this presentation will not be applicable to all Iraqis. Changes in Iraqi culture will also occur as the acculturation process continues in the United States.

Providers are encouraged to assess the needs and behavior of all patients individually.

Iraq

- ✦ Population is 28 million
- ✦ Slightly larger than Texas
- ✦ ~75% Arabs
- ✦ ~15% Kurds
- ✦ Smaller numbers of Armenians, Assyrians, and Turkomen
- ✦ Islam is practiced by 97% of the population (Shi'ism (60%), Sunni)
- ✦ Arabic is the national language



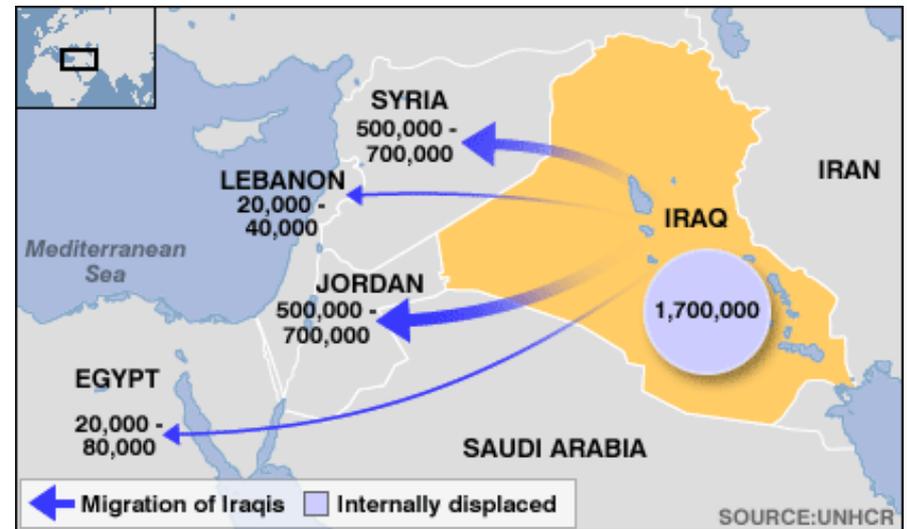
A Brief History

- ✧ Cradle of Civilization
- ✧ 4000 BC Sumerian culture flourishes
- ✧ 7th Century AD—Caliphs rule
- ✧ 1534—Turkish Ottoman Empire
- ✧ Post WWI—British Protectorate
- ✧ 1932—Independence
- ✧ 1968—Ba'ath Party gains control
- ✧ 1979—Saddam Hussein assumes presidency
- ✧ 1980—Iran-Iraq War
- ✧ 1991—Persian Gulf War
- ✧ 2003—US invades Iraq, beginning of the Iraq War
- ✧ December 15, 2011—US declares Iraq War officially over



Iraqi Refugees

- ✦ More than 4 million Iraqis have been displaced by the war in Iraq
- ✦ Most Iraqi refugees live in local neighborhoods, rather than camps



Food



Iraqis make soft drinks at home from rose petals, orange blossoms, lemons, pomegranates, or raisins.

- ✦ Visitors are treated like kings; food is lavished upon them.
- ✦ Popular main courses—kebabs, quzi (roasted and stuffed lamb), and kubba (minced meat with raisins, nuts, and spices)
- ✦ Popular desserts—Turkish delight, rice pudding, baklava
- ✦ Tea and coffee are the most widely consumed drinks. Alcohol is forbidden for Muslims.
- ✦ Typical spices include saffron and mint
- ✦ Muslims must adhere to halal laws

Etiquette

- ✦ Three social classes: the political elite; the military and merchant class, and peasants/laborers
- ✦ Iraqis consider family unity and honor to be extremely important
- ✦ Topics are usually discussed in an indirect manner
- ✦ Being on time is not considered that important



Greeting

Salaam aleikum—
Peace be upon you

Wa aleikum salaam— Peace
be upon you too.

Gender Roles

- ✦ Iraqi cultural is patriarchal
- ✦ Women are expected to be quiet and meek in the presence of men but may wield a lot of power over household affairs
- ✦ In Iraq women are encouraged to work outside of the home— including as teachers, engineers, and in the medical profession
- ✦ Arranged marriages and marriage to girls as young as thirteen are common
- ✦ UNHCR reports that some Iraqi women and children are partaking in prostitution and/or being trafficked



Reproduction

- ✦ Women in labor are usually surrounded by female relatives and friends
- ✦ Babies are typically delivered by a midwife at home
- ✦ Men are usually not present during the delivery
- ✦ Birth control is virtually non-existent in Iraq but is becoming more common in the West



Death & Dying

- ✦ Family members usually do not blame health care providers for the death of a loved one—death is considered a destiny decided by God
- ✦ Family members need to stay with the body until it is removed from the hospital
- ✦ Muslims prefer to bury the body on the day death occurs

Medical Care

- ✦ The Iran-Iraq war, Gulf war, and 2003 US Invasion have devastated the health care system in Iraq
- ✦ Arab culture and Islamic religion emphasize maintaining good health through hygiene and healthy diet
- ✦ Both men and women prefer to be seen by male doctors. For pregnancy or gynecological issues, women typically prefer a female provider



Medical Care Continued



- ✦ In Arab countries, patients are told only the good news about their disease by doctors—serious problems are reported to a selected family member
- ✦ Arab patients expect relief from pain and to receive medication on the first visit
- ✦ Nurses are seen as helpers, not health care professionals, and their suggestions or advice are not always taken seriously
- ✦ During Ramadan conservative Muslims may refuse medications during daylight hours

*Health Issues of Concern—
Based on a CDC study in San Diego*

- ✦ Latent TB Infection (14.1%)
- ✦ Obesity (23.6%)
- ✦ Hypertension (15.2% for all, 64% for >65)
- ✦ Hyperlipidemia (40% for >40)
- ✦ Acute Malnourishment (7% of children)
- ✦ Anemia (30% of women of childbearing age)

Mental Health



- ✦ Many Iraqis are not accustomed to the profession of social workers—they typically rely on friends and family
- ✦ People with mental illness are often looked down on
- ✦ Iraqis often express vague global descriptions of symptoms and may not distinguish between mental and physical states
- ✦ As a consequence of the war, trauma, high levels of, injury and chronic illness exist among the refugee population.
- ✦ Individual, rather than group therapy, may be more appropriate initially

Mental Health Continued

Social Stressors:

- Loss of social and economic status
- War atrocities and fear for family left behind
- Extended familial support (cultural norm) is disrupted
- Females may especially face regret for leaving behind family

Center for Torture and Trauma Survivors Study

	Bhutanese	Burmese	Iraqi	Somali	Others	Total/Average
Number of refugees	33	58	72	12	26	201
Depression	43.3%	31.5%	59.1%	41.6%		
Anxiety	43.3%	31.5%	60%	33.4%		
Somatization	43.3%	31.9%	63.1%	58.3%		
Hearing voices/seeing things other do not see	51.6%	41.8%	66.7%	83.4%		52.6%
Have enemies follow around	48.4%	40%	62.6%	50%		51.6%
Decreased memory/concentration	61.3%	27.8%	69.7%	25%		48.7%
Suicidal thoughts/actions	63.3%	43.6%	66.7%	75%		55.4%
Felt like taking drugs/smoking	61.3%	40%	70.8%	66.7%		53.4%
PTSD	33.3%	3.8%	54.7%	14.3%		33.9%

Special Issues

- ✦ Many Iraqis arrive with unrealistic expectations regarding housing, resettlement agency services, and employment opportunities.
- ✦ Say “I’ll try”, rather than saying something that may be interpreted as a promise
- ✦ Some Iraqi men may interpret friendliness in an American woman as a sign of romantic or sexual interest



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