Background:

Since the U.S invasion of Iraq in 2003, approximately 2.5 million Iraqis have left their country and have become refugees. This does not include an estimated 2.5 million Iraqis who have become internally displaced. This means that approximately one out of every five Iraqis has had to leave his/her country since 2003. Although exact figures are difficult to determine, the figures above are widely believed to be significantly lower than the actual figures.

The Iraq war has received extensive media coverage since the outbreak of hostilities. By contrast, the ensuing refugee crisis has been largely ignored by the main stream of the international media.

In the past six years, the Iraqi refugee crisis has developed into the worst humanitarian crisis in the Middle East since 1948, posing a danger not only to Iraq but also to its neighbors. Specifically, Syria and Jordan both opened their borders to Iraqis at the start of the conflict but have since imposed restrictions on refugee entry. Syria took in an estimated 1.2 million refugees while Jordan accepted about 750,000. These numbers represent a large increase in the existing population, as high as 14% for Jordan.

Studies have shown that the majority of civilian deaths in Iraq have been male adults. This means that many of the internally displaced families as well as families that have sought refuge outside Iraq are female-headed households. In Syria, for example, an estimated 27% of the Iraqi households are headed by females. This, coupled with the fact that Iraqi refugees are denied work visas and cannot therefore secure steady employment, means that these Iraqi families have become increasingly destitute. The female heads of household, suddenly thrust into the position of assuming full responsibility for their families, are desperately struggling to cope with this new situation.

Iraqis now represent the second largest refugee population in the world--after Afghanistan. As their meager economic resources dwindle, refugees, particularly those in Syria, find themselves facing increasingly difficult circumstances. This is especially the case with respect to the more vulnerable segment of the refugee population: women and young girls, many of whom have been forced into prostitution for economic reasons.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), estimates that about half of the Iraqi refugees in Syria are school age. Although the Syrian government has offered free health care and education services to all Iraqis, many refugees lack the requisite documentation to register; others cannot afford the small fees for uniforms, or can ill afford to give up the children’s meager incomes.
Research:

Hypothesis: The experience of displacement and the concomitant socio-economic conditions in Syria are likely to have a profound and lasting impact on shaping the identity of Iraqi females, with long-term social and political implications for Iraq as well as for the Middle East. The refugee experience will not represent a temporary spatial displacement but will have a defining and transformative impact on the subsequent Iraqi nationalism and statehood. I will explore the possibility of a theoretical comparison to an alternate refugee population, such as Afghans or Palestinians.

Research Objectives:
1) To better understand the Iraqi female's perception of her circumstance as a refugee and her ability to cope with war-related trauma.
2) To explore the malleability of the Iraqi and Muslim sectarian identities as they are challenged in an external context.
3) To investigate the possibility of an Iraqi sub-culture forming within Damascus.
4) To compare data gathered from different participants to gain a broader appreciation for long-term implications in terms of return to Iraq after immersion in the Syrian culture.

I plan to undertake research on the experiences of young Iraqi females living in and around Damascus. To this end, I will live in Damascus this summer for a two-month period during which I will interact extensively with this refugee population. I will thus gain a fuller understanding of the effects of war-related trauma on the age group that is the focus of my investigation.

Some of the questions that the proposed study poses pertain to the effects of war-related traumatic events on respondents, how respondents cope with the distress of displacement, how their experiences resemble or diverge from the conventional diasporic state. Another set of questions relate to those respondents who have joined the Syrian educational system. Have they integrated fully into this system? Does the Syrian dialect constitute an impediment to such integration? Do they feel ostracized by Syrian pupils? Do they practice self-segregation?

Yet another area the study aims to investigate is the question of identity. The war in Iraq and the ensuing sectarian strife have led to a fragmented Iraqi identity and to the emergence of conflicting identities. Has this situation spilled over into the land of exile? In other words, has the “Iraqi” identity been similarly reconfigured along racial, ethnic, and sectarian lines among refugee communities in Syria? Or has the converse taken place? That is, has the “Iraqi” identity recuperated as a result of spatial removal from the locus of strife? Has it become more clearly articulated as a result of expatriation?

The answers to the above questions will shed some light on the manner in which young Iraqi girls have been coping with the traumatic experiences of war and displacement. They will also afford important insights into the unfolding process of identity fragmentation, (re)construction, as well as the interface between identity and politics. Above all, they will point to the long-term social and political implications of the war in Iraq for that country as well as for the entire Middle East region.
Despite their enormous significance, these issues have not received sufficient scholarly attention so far. I therefore envision my proposed research as a timely and a pertinent undertaking that will contribute in an important way to a more nuanced understanding of the Middle East region.

Methodology:

The study will focus on the experiences of female Iraqi refugees aged approximately 18 to 22 living in Damascus. The initial site for research will be the headquarters of the International Catholic Migration Commission. It is a humanitarian organization dedicated to the assistance of refugees world-wide and maintains a field office in Syria. This non-governmental organization has agreed to support the research and to allow the use of its office in Damascus for interviews (see attached letter of support).

Timeline:

I plan to use the first two weeks to become familiar with the ethnic, religious, and economic demography of the city. I will hold an orientation with the various supporting organizations (see attached letter of support) in Damascus to establish a workspace and receive on-the-ground guidance. I will explore the city and conduct participant observation. This will entail observation of various social spaces around the city and their respective ethnic composition. In addition, I will enter the Iraqi neighborhoods around Damascus to further explore the Iraqi sub-culture and extrapolate on its visible manifestations. Thereafter, I will conduct three to four interviews per week.

Method 1: Participant Observation

The purpose of the initial participant observation will be to observe the refugee population in their interactions throughout the city. I will explore the possibility of the Iraqi sub-culture and see if it is manifested in public arenas such as schools, coffee shops, neighborhoods, etc. I will investigate the use of the Iraqi versus Syrian dialects. The above observations will allow me to refine my hypothesis and prepare for interviews.

Method 2: Personal, Semi-Structured Interview

The International Catholic Migration Commission will refer potential participants to me once they have been informed of the nature of the study and have agreed to participate. I will conduct short, preliminary interviews with each woman. Upon being granted permission, interviews will be recorded. These interviews will cover topics ranging from demographic information, current schooling situation, social habits and ideas about the future. The exact questions and interview script are currently being reviewed and revised by an anthropology professor and will be returned to me today in order to be submitted for CPHS review. The script will be translated into Arabic under the supervision of Professor Hussein Kadhim.

Confidentiality:

All data will be stored in Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word (v. 10). Documents and files used to store data will be password-protected on my personal laptop. Data
collected from participants will be coded. Each participant will be assigned a four digit identification number. This will be used in all subsequent databases and transcriptions, including interview recordings. The document corresponding participant identities to identification numbers will be password-protected and read-only, and stored on my personal laptop. Final research will refer to identification numbers or alternate assigned names. The identities of participants will remain confidential throughout interviews, analysis and publication.

Preparation:

I feel qualified to conduct this research and then formulate a substantive and a coherent thesis. I have been studying Arabic since my freshman fall, three years ago, and have reached an advanced level of proficiency in the language. I am the recipient of three citations from different professors for outstanding performance in Arabic. In addition to the numerous Arabic language courses that I have taken at Dartmouth, I spent my freshman summer participating in an intensive Arabic program at Harvard University. Moreover, during my sophomore year, I spent four months living and studying in Alexandria, Egypt. I will conduct most of the research using Arabic (Modern Standard Arabic as well as Iraqi and Syrian dialects).

In addition to my extensive preparation in Arabic, I feel that my knowledge of and familiarity with the Arab world will assure the successful completion of the research project. I lived and studied in Alexandria, Egypt, for four months (two months of which were a homestay with an Egyptian family). This gave me an exceptional opportunity to closely observe different facets of Egyptian/Arab cultures and traditions and to gain a deeper understanding of them.

During my stay in Egypt, moreover, I was able to travel extensively throughout the country. This included no less than five trips to Cairo, the Arab world’s largest city. I also visited Turkey and Jordan. I spent over a week in Istanbul, a city that has an amazing array of Eastern and Western cultural traditions and influences. In Jordan, I traveled from the northern-most corner of that country to the capital, Amman, then to the Dead Sea region, and also to the ancient city of Petra in the southwest of the country.

My travel in the Middle East broadened my understanding of that region, its peoples and traditions; it also gave me a wholesome measure of self-confidence resulting from the effective handling of various situations related to the day-to-day living in the region.

I acknowledge my relative inexperience in conducting the research necessary to complete this project. My studies have focused on language and regional studies, rather than social sciences; however, I am studying anthropological methods now in preparation for my research. I have worked with two anthropology professors and a student who has completed similar research, and am reading extensively about the methods of ethnography. In addition, I am in contact with the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects and am working closely with them to complete the complete study plan. The final proposal will be submitted on May 18th and a representative from the
Committee anticipates only minor revisions being necessary. I have been granted a travel waiver by the Provost and my research will be funded by the Dickey Center and Undergraduate Research and Advising.

I am in contact with a graduate student alumna of Dartmouth who is currently working on Iraqi gender history. She has carried out interviews with the Iraqi refugee population and I anticipate her guidance to be very valuable. We are in the process of scheduling a time to speak at length. Her advisor has also offered to be of service.

I have gained the support of a number of important international relief organizations that maintain field offices in Damascus. These include the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), which has agreed to formally support my project and to provide me with office space for the conducting of interviews (see below). Moreover, a representative from the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) has offered to let me meet with their Damascus staff to be briefed about working with refugees. In addition, I have a number of other contacts in Damascus in such organizations as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and Catholic Relief Services (CRS). These organizations employ a qualified and dedicated staff with ample experience working with Iraqi refugees in Syria. I am grateful for the opportunity to work with them.

I appreciate the Steering Committee’s consideration of my thesis proposal and the thoughtful comments brought to my attention after the first version. I am working diligently to address all of the concerns, and am optimistic that I have made progress. I would like to note that I will be writing the thesis my senior winter and spring, so will be conducting more extensive traditional research at a later date. I will explore the possibility of a comparison with Afghan or Palestinian refugees. I agree that that will enhance the thesis and help evolve it from simple reportage to thesis.

I hope that this proposal has conveyed my enthusiasm for and ability to conduct this research and the subsequent senior thesis. Apart from my abiding interest in the study of the Middle East, I am particularly interested in the experiences of young Iraqi female refugees in Syria—an area that has remained largely unexplored. Investigating it is as exciting as it is intellectually rewarding. It will truly represent a culminating experience for me.
Relevant Coursework:

- Arabic 22
- Arabic 23
- Arabic 31
- Arabic 32
- Arabic 33
- Arabic 41 (Includes Modern Standard Arabic, Egyptian Colloquial, Media Arabic, Arabic Translation)
- Arabic 61. Topics in Modern Arabic Literature and Culture
- Arabic 62. Topics in Classical Arabic Literature and Culture
- Arabic 63. Themes in Arabic Literature and Culture
- History of the 20th Century Arab World
- Sex, Gender and Society
- Introduction to the Islamic World
- The Arab-Israeli Conflict Through Literature and Film

Contacts:

- Margarita Tileva, Regional Director, Middle East, International Catholic Migration Commission
  - Provided formal letter of support of research (see below). Agreed to provide office space for conducting interviews.
- Amal Morcos, Director of Communications, International Orthodox Christian Charities
  - Agreed to meeting with members of her staff in Damascus to be briefed about working with refugees
- Vivan Manneh, Catholic Relief Services
  - Agreed to a meeting in Damascus to discuss my research project
- Osama Al-Mohammad, Program Manager, International Catholic Migration Commission
  - Agreed to a meeting in Damascus to give formal support.
- Sienna Craig, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Dartmouth College
- Dale Eickelman, Professor of Anthropology, Dartmouth College
- Ayah Ahmed, Dartmouth Student ‘09
  - Conducted similar fieldwork in Egypt on health care. Agreed to a meeting in May to discuss research and fieldwork in the Middle East.
- Panos Moumtzis, Director of UNRWA Affairs in Damascus
  - Gave referral to UNHCR
- Julie Norman, Dickey Center Fellow
  - Meeting scheduled to discuss her work with refugee youth in the West Bank.
- Karin Brandt
  - Discussed her experience with Iraqi refugees in Jordan
- Beth Baron, Professor
  - Discussed her work with women in Egypt
Sara Pursley, Graduate Student, Dartmouth '90
  - Writing a dissertation on Iraqi gender history

Proposed Bibliography:


