

Spectrum

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Article 5

2019

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Recommended Citation

Jarrar, Sarah (2019) "From Baghdad to Bedford: Conceptualizing Diasporas and Aslak (your origins) through the framework of Iraqis in New Hampshire," *Spectrum*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/spectrum/vol8/iss1/5>

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From Baghdad to Bedford: Conceptualizing Diasporas and *Aslak* (your origins) through the framework of Iraqis in New Hampshire

By Sarah Jarrar

Introduction

Abdullah is nineteen years old, and as he thinks about how to respond to the questions “what parts of your family’s tradition would you like to carry on as you grow older?” he motions his left hand forward and back over right shoulder. “There’s a word in Arabic...it’s *Aslak*. That’s something you can never get rid of.” *Aslak* in Arabic translate to English as “your origins”. When we are asked about our origins, how do we formulate our answers? Do we look to our parents, grandparents, even great grandparents for the answers? How and why do we adopt their country or city of origin if we do? With migrants, the answer to *Aslak* may seem to be a little clearer; they leave one geographic location to another and the differences of where they came from and where they are now made distinct. *Aslak* is an identity and consciousness that is created by a community, whether within their country of origin or in a new setting.

Diaspora generally is a term that applies to communities of people who reside outside their country of origin, but as the term has evolved to fit in various groups, questions of how individuals create a sense of origin and maintain this, greatly contributes to whether or not those living outside their country of origin are actually of a diaspora. Within the framework of Iraqis in New Hampshire, I argue that the theoretical definition of the term should better align with the general lived experiences of those in diaspora across various nationalities and ethnicities and origins. Instead of viewing the term as a paradigm of restrictive and definitive requirements, I suggest that it is more constructive to think of the term in regard to general elements. These

elements, are more accessible and realistic to subsequent generations and what they experience, which allows them to maintain a space as a part of a greater Diaspora.

Discussion on Diaspora

To begin to conceptualize the definition of Diaspora in a new way, it is first crucial to understand how it has been defined in scholarship up to the current day. The earliest of works that specifically discusses the term in regard to the turn of the 20th century, and still quite relevant up to this day, is the work of Safran (1991), who formulates a set of criteria that is an extension of Walker Connors definition, who regarded a diaspora or any dispersion of people as any “segment of people living outside the homeland.” This criterion includes the following elements: they, or their ancestors (1) have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; (2) retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; (3) believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; (4) regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; (5) believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and (6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (Safran 1991, 83).

Along with this criterion, Safran (1991) compares and contrasts several groups to Jews, who the author argues to the first and truest type of diaspora as the term originated to specify this

group. He elaborates upon each of the requirements above by comparing groups such as Palestinians, Cubans, Chinese, Poles, Turkish and Armenians to the Jewish diaspora and the shortfalls of each group in coming close to the “ideal type of Jewish Diaspora.” For example, the author makes the distinction between Poles who migrated to France and those who migrated to the United States after 1880. Those who migrated to France maintained a vow to reestablish the Polish state and maintained Polish culture, while those who arrived to the United States did so voluntarily to find work, and that subsequent Polish generations had assimilated (Safran 1991, 85). Through this example, he implies that a diaspora must also have been forcibly displaced, which is an addition to the criteria stated above. Another comparison he makes, between Jews and Palestinians, is how that some of the Palestinians who left what is now Israel and pre-1948 Palestine are not considered a diaspora if they live within another Arab community, such as those in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. This is because displaced Palestinians within these nations “do not have to the kinds of cultural or linguistic sacrifices characteristic of other diasporas” (Safran 1991, 86). Here, the author also implies that extensive cultural sacrifices such as language, marital practices, religions, etc. is a characteristic that constitutes a diaspora. This is just two of various examples in which Safran (1991) adds to his extensive list of requirements that define who and who is not of a diaspora.

There are several components of the author’s argument that I find problematic. Besides the various requirements that individuals in a displaced collective are supposed to meet and maintain trans-generationally, Safran (1991) splits larger groups of diasporic communities into “genuine diaspora” or “not a diaspora.” Secondly, the author defines diasporas in terms of one another and not in isolation. This creates a hierarchical degree-system of diaspora with Jews being on the top as the most genuine type of diaspora, followed by Armenians and so on. This

system does not serve a purpose and seems to only complicate the term. And thirdly, Safran's (1991) construction of requirements does not seem sustainable beyond progenitor generations. This may have been done with intention by the author, as generations that are subsequent to those who are physically displaced are not meant to be considered of a diaspora anymore, but this truly undermines the position first and second generation diasporic community members and their roles in connecting their origins, or *Asl*, to their new communities. Even though published in 1991, Safran's work has become outdated, and nearly thirty years forward has seen the development and evolution of the various groups he speaks about.

A less restrictive, more constructive perspective view on constructing the term is provided by Brubaker (2005). Not to the other end of the spectrum of Safran does Brubaker argue all displaced people are a diaspora. Brubaker (2005, 1-12) explains "If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so. The term loses its discriminating power- its ability to pick out phenomena, to make distinctions. The universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora." This scholar rather provides three core elements that "remain widely understood to be constitutive of diaspora" which include the following: dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary-maintenance. Dispersion generally is regarded as any movement across state borders whether it be forced or otherwise. Homeland orientation refers to either a real, physical or imagined that serves as some sort of significance, whether it be a source of identity construction or source of personal value. And thirdly, boundary-maintenance refers to any effort to preserve or keep distinction and separate a sense of identity of culture that is separate from that of the host society which occurs over an extended period of time (Brubaker 2005, 5-6).

Extending from Brubaker's logic, the definition of diaspora that I would like to form builds upon the three-core element of what defines a diaspora. I propose that in addition to these fundamental criteria, the memory and maintenance of them through subsequent generations is also crucial in the conceptualizing and defining of diasporas. This is due to the fact, as demonstrated later in contextualizing this definition to Iraqis in the United States and New Hampshire specifically, the offspring of migrating communities adopt a major role in shaping and maintaining the memory of origins. These subsequent generations do so with an intimate encounter with the host society that their recent forefathers did not have.

Iraqis in the United States

The name "Iraq" refers to the nation-state that has only come to be in existence over the past century. A former region of the Ottoman Empire, the nation of Iraq first formed as a semi-autonomous monarchy under a League of Nations mandate in conjunction with the British. Through the July 14th revolution, the nation obtained full independence and establishment of a republic in 1958 (Tripp 2007, 89). The region has included various religious and ethnic groups, including Shia'a and Sunni Muslims, Christians, Jews, Bahai, Yazidis, Kurds, Turkmen, Arabs, and Armenians. To maintain brevity, this summary of conflict in Iraq is to demonstrate the various possible push-factors that would force Iraqis to leave. The height of Iraqi migration to the United States and west in general has been recent, starting from the early and mid 1990s, heightened in 2003 when the United States invaded Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government. This conflict continued and worsened into 2006 up to 2011 when U.S forces withdrew from Iraq. This coincided with the beginning of the Arab Spring, and the rise in number of insurgents of ISIL (so-called Islamic state of Iraq and the Levant) who eventually

would take over parts of the country. Many Iraqis have been settling in the neighboring countries such as Syria (many although resettled in Syria had to leave Syria due to its civil war), Jordan, Lebanon. Beyond the Middle East, Iraqis have been resettling in the west, and in 2000, Iraqis were the second largest group of asylum seekers in Western industrialized countries (Alkhairo 2008, 77). Many Iraqis have settled in the United States; between 2006 and 2010, nearly 75,000 Iraqi refugee households were recorded in the U.S census, averaging about 3 to 4 individuals per household (Asi & Beaulieu 2013). As for the state of New Hampshire, recent figures provided by the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services show that between 2010 and 2017, 483 Iraqi refugees have been resettled in the state. Iraqis constitute an overwhelming majority of refugees from the Middle East that resettle in New Hampshire, which between 2010 and 2017 totaled to 542.¹ This number does not account for individuals who are not UN registered refugees.

The Iraqi Experience in New Hampshire

This new conceptualization of the term that I propose attempts to close the gap between the lived experiences of those in diasporic communities and the theoretical definition of the term. To better understand what these lived experiences are in context, various interactions and interviews were conducted with Iraqi individuals in central and southern New Hampshire communities. These interactions were with two families, one residing in Concord, New Hampshire and the other in Manchester, New Hampshire. These interactions can be split into two

¹ NH Department of Health and Human Services Office of Health Equity. NH Refugee Resettlement-Country of Origin FY 2009-2017 (NH Office of Health Equity). <https://www.dhhs.nh.gov/omh/refugee/documents/ref-pop-chart.pdf> (Accessed March 12, 2019).

general categories: Iraqi parents and their children. The parents are the individuals who made the conscious decision to leave Iraq, and their children arrived with them to the United States at relatively young ages. Among the conversations with the parents, they strongly meet the central elements provided by Brubaker. They maintain a strong sense of the homeland, which was demonstrated in conversation and also in material they provided me. An example of this was with Nawras Al Taher (2013), the mother of the family in Concord, who provided me with an article she wrote within the first few years of her life in the United States. She had mentioned it was for the local newspaper who was working with a local migrant out-reach group (the name I am unaware of) to publish articles by migrants about their home countries.

In her paper, Nawras wrote about her experience in a religious ritual for Shiite Muslims in which she walked from her city of Babylon to Karbala on foot during the commemoration of the Battle of Karbala. Nawras writes “I really miss my home my country and my ceremony. I always remember crying as I walked, but with a real feeling of pride when I walked to Karbala” (Al Taher 2013). Along with a strong sense for the homeland, they also demonstrate a sense of separation from American society. In an interview with Nawras’s son and daughter, Ameer and Fatima, when asked about the origins of the people his parents associate with, they answered “Iraqis” and “Arabs in general.” As for the family in Manchester, the eldest son Abdullah mentioned in his interview that both of his parents are unemployed, and his father in particular still keeps very strong connections with members of an Iraqi tribe that his grandfather used be the head of formerly in Iraq (Abdullah 2018). It is evident that these parents fit well into Brubaker’s elements, but I further push this to understand how their children fit into them and through this I come to understand the significance of how they adopt and shape their own notions of origin.

The terms “origin” “homeland” and even “nationalism” can be distinct, but in the case of generations of diaspora, they can all blend together and become synonymous with one another. Edward Said writes in *Reflection on Exile* “Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture and custom; and by doing so, it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages” (Said 2000, 176). Here, Said does not speak of nationalism in strictly political terms, but rather in a sense of belonging that notions of origin and homeland provide. With this, it is interesting to note how the children of both families responded to questions about how they self-identify. Ameer and Fatima responded strongly to the question with the following statements:

Fatima: “I consider myself to be fully Iraqi.”

Ameer: “I agree. Just because, you know, you move to another place doesn’t mean you have to forget about your old place, where you were born in”

Fatima: “What he trying to say is, you never forget your roots” (Ameer and Fatima 2018)

Fatima and Ameer migrated to the United States with their parents as migrants at the ages of 6 and 10 respectively in 2011. Since then, they discussed in the interview how successful they feel they have been in assimilating but have continued to keep their distinct Iraqi identity that they feel has some superiority over any sense of an American identity they have. Along with Iraqi identity, Fatima and Ameer discussed Iraq with fond memories that they have seemed to maintain strongly since they were last there (which was right before they left in 2011; they have not been back since): Ameer: ... “It [Iraq] was always nice. If I was lucky, my grandfather would let me have them over at my house because I had like a big garden and a full court, not full court, field. It was awesome” (Ameer and Fatima 2018) When asked if they would like to go back to Iraq one day, both Fatima and Ameer affirmatively replied that they would. As for Abdullah, who spoke on behalf of himself and his younger sister Myriam, his sense of origin was just as

strong as that of Fatima and Ameer, but in a slightly different and more critical way. When asked of his identity, Abdullallah looked on his past life experiences to formulate his answer. Born in Iraq, his parents registered as refugees under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and were resettled in Syria. After 5 years, Abdullallah's family was able to be settled again to the United States, where his sister could seek treatment for her Sickle-Cell Anemia. "I have something from every place" said Abdullallah "I have a little from Iraq, from Syria and from here [United States/ New Hampshire]."

This is where Abdullallah refers to *Aslak* that opened this discussion. He mentions that your *roots*, the same term Fatima and Ameer used, are something you cannot get rid of. Abdullallah mentioned that he will always be Iraqi, and that it is a part of him that inevitable. Although, when asked about any sense of wanting to go back to Iraq, he answered by saying "it's sad to see *our* country destroyed day after day. There is no opportunity for me there" (Abdullallah 2018). Although he does not have an enchanted notion of the homeland, Abdullallah still sees Iraq as a collective, possessive *our*; a place that he feels sentiment towards. Abdullallah, Ameer and Fatima all discussed at some point during our discussions that they have formed relationships with "Americans" or members of the host society. They all also mentioned that they had Iraqi friends as well. To expand on this, Abdullallah mentioned the significance of this. "I have two very close friends. One is Afghani, and the other is French-Canadian. With my Afghani friend, it is nice because we share similar cultures; once I reached high school (Abdullallah is now a freshman in college) I noticed how important is was for me to find people like me with a similar background" (Abdullallah 2018).

All three young Iraqi migrants mentioned above have many similarities. The all have obtained a sense of origin in regard to Iraq, whether chosen or passed down. They are *rooted* in

Iraq, a place whether inhabitable or not, they feel a part who they are comes from (if not all of who they are). The homeland of Iraq for these three youth does not seem to be a political one, but rather a cultural one that digs deeper past the conflict and economic turmoil. To try can trace back to exact source of this notion of the homeland and origin for these youth would digress from the purpose of this discussion. Rather, it is noteworthy that these youth have adopted a sense of origin that is distinct from their host society. This may be different for those Iraqis who are born in the United States but considering how young the individuals discussed here were when they came to the United States, it may be difficult to find a distinction between how the development of this sense of origin would have been different. One case that may be of use to compare is that of Yassin Alsalman, whose parents are from Basra, Iraq but was born in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Alsalman migrated to Montreal, Canada at the age of five in 1987 and now currently is a rapper and artist who works under the stage name Narcy. His works focuses on the experience of youth like him, who grew up in the West with an Iraqi and Arab heritage, This is exemplified in one song composed and performed by Alsalma called *Gabah*, or *Forest* when translated into English. The last few lines from the song reads:

A Basrawi [referring to someone from Basra, Iraq] boy was born in the forest of Canada, where he learned that our differences are not to be compared, there is no point. Our nation has no borders. it was where the richness of humanity lies on their tongues between their cheeks. I screamed at the flowers and got nothing back but cold silence. I guess this is goodbye/hello as I find myself between the same leaves and animals again” (Alsalman 2014).

Here, Alsalman refers to his own origins as being from Basra, and as he calls out for the “flowers” that represent the Iraqi part of his identity, he is left in the “same leaves and animals” that refer to Canada, the place he had been brought to at a young age. Similarly to the youth in

New Hampshire, Alsalman expresses an Iraqi origin and homeland that he longs for as he lives his life in the west.

Conclusion

Nearly twenty years into the twenty-first century, migration is occurring at a rate and at a density that is globally unprecedented. Whatever the push-pull factors may be causing individuals and families to leave their place of origin, their maintenance of this sense of origin and preservation of identity make them part of a Diaspora for as long as their children retain and uphold these memories. Being of a Diaspora is not citizenship; it has no legal weight formal documentation is provided to legitimate origin in the eyes of a government. Despite this, being a member of a Diaspora is to be of a collective in which several people share the same struggles. The relevance of defining diasporas is to recognize (but not to generalize) these struggles, and the dual-identity that Diasporas. In recognizing Diasporas, it supports this pragmatic self-identification of individuals who seek a sense of belonging that is not through means of legality or formality, which for many is impossible due to their residence outside the borders out of the homeland. Moving forward, the recognition of these Diasporas can enable profound connections between them and their home communities. In the example of Ireland, a consultancy firm has been created in Dublin to help countries, cities, corporations and institutions develop strategies to form diaspora outreach to establish and continuously increase their influence. Once diasporas are recognized, their valuable contributions both to their host country and to their home country can be identified and harnessed. Migration may no longer mean physical isolation from the homeland; in bringing forth diasporas, it boldens the connections between nations and peoples.

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