IRAQI DIASPORIC IDENTITY ACROSS GENERATIONS, STRUGGLE, AND WAR

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Marwa Wael Alkhairo, B.A.

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Marwa Wael Alkhairo, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Rochelle A. Davis, PhD

ABSTRACT

Now more than ever, Iraqi sectarian and ethnic identities have assumed larger roles in Iraq’s political conflict due to a sectarianism discourse and sectarian infighting. Since before the 2003 Iraq war, many US policymakers and the media have sustained this discourse by presupposing that communal identities reign supreme in Iraq, and that there is therefore no societal cohesion as Iraqi national sentiment and identity do not exist. This simplistic postulation is inadequate and can lead to disastrous proposals—leaving a nuanced and multi-layered understanding to be pursued. This thesis examines Iraqi diasporic identity-formation by analyzing 77 extensive interviews with members of the Iraqi diasporic community residing in the Washington DC-Metropolitan area. It traces the interviewees' self-narratives from their time in Iraq until today; and examines if and how their identity-formations have been affected since leaving Iraq and more specifically after the 2003 Iraq war. Through nostalgic memories, many Iraqis have frozen their past to cope with the perplexing present, and project the frozen past to the future as a refuge for their identity. A majority of the interviewees do not identify with post-2003 Iraq, blame the violence on external forces, reject the sectarianism discourse, tell their memories of a unified Iraq, and hope for a homegrown democratic government that places Iraqi society as its main priority. They live in a condition of diasporic (dis)enchantment and have created refuge identities that provide them a sense of permanence.
This thesis is dedicated to Mama and Baba, my parents; and to Mama Najat, my maternal grandmother who passed away in the diaspora on October 27, 2008. It is they who have kept me diasporically enchanted.

With all my love and admiration,
Marwa Wael Alkhairo
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sitting in her morning room surrounded by paintings of scenes of Baghdad and southern Iraq’s abundant palm trees, Lamya\(^1\) was staring at the lake in her backyard. “I call this my Iraq room,” she said. “I tried to recreate my house in Baghdad. The lake is the river; the palm trees are aligned with my house. It is still not the same image, but I always sit in this room to find peace.” When I asked her what she made out of the current situation in Iraq, she wept:

I don’t understand any of this. I swear to Allah, Iraq was not like this before. I know Iraqis. We are angry and hot-tempered, but never would we have thought to hurt each other and impose so much pain on one another.

I said she could stop the interview if she felt uncomfortable. She refused, saying that it was her duty to speak with me:

I like America a lot, but it really did bad things to Iraq this time around. I just don’t know. It has done a lot of good for my family and me. But I didn’t want to leave Iraq; it hurt me to leave Iraq. Iraq had everything; it could have been more than this country that I live in now. But history has been so cruel to Iraq. And what can we do? We are human. What human will choose to suffer? We had the ability to move, so we moved. We thought one day we will return. Now I do not see us returning. I think we are here forever. And if they chop up Iraq, then never will I see the country that I love so much – I still smell its air.

I then asked Lamya how she spoke of and defined herself:

I am Iraqi, I am Mesopotamian, I am Arab, I am not Sunni or Shi’a. *Allah ekhaleech*\(^2\) this gives me a headache. Again, I am not Sunni or Shi’a. I am Muslim. Is that clear? I breathe Iraq, my soul is Iraq, my hands that I work with are Iraq. No one can take Iraq from me … but let me tell you, I have been here

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\(^{1}\) This excerpt is taken from an interview conducted in December 2007 in Northern Virginia. Lamya is a pseudonym. All of the names in this thesis are pseudonyms used to protect the interviewees’ privacy. All interviews were conducted in English, unless otherwise indicated. Lamya has been living in the United States for 22 years and is a former teacher. She comes from an affluent family and has four grown children. Interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 17 December 2007.

\(^{2}\) In the Iraqi dialect, this means “God keep you” in the sense of “please have mercy on me, do not inconvenience me with this talk.”
for thirty years. … And I am American. But who … tell me who says that I have to be one or the other? My roots and my heart are in Iraq. In fact, my life in Iraq is what prepared me to be in America. I am Iraqi, I am American, I am Arab, I am Muslim, I am a woman, I am a mother, I am a doctor. My identity does not stop today; my identity will continue to change tomorrow.

1.1 Setting the Stage

This thesis on the identity-formation of members of the Iraqi diaspora in the United States seeks to contextualize and interpret the narratives, such as Lamya’s, that an array of Iraqis have kindly provided me with during the past year. It is both an academic pursuit to contribute to the field of diasporic identity and memory studies, as well as a personal venture to speak to a community that is affiliated with a country that has been the subject of intense debate. Five years of the 2003 Iraq war have passed, leaving tens of thousands dead, millions displaced, and a country that will perhaps take decades to repair.

What is Iraq to the Iraqi diasporic community, and how, if at all, do its members identify with it? At this critical point in history, it is important to undertake a study of Iraqis in the diasporic limelight. Members of the Armenian diaspora, which is one of the most persistent and active communities, have made tremendous contributions in supporting the development of Armenia. The Jewish diasporic community - although most if its members are not diasporic Israelis - has also taken significant measures to help create and continue to sustain the State of Israel. Will Iraqis engage in similar endeavors, and what does this say about the future of the Iraqi nation and the Iraqi nation-state? More specifically, what will be the prevailing discourses of Iraqi identity? Iraqis’ self-narratives and autobiographies are perhaps the only resources that will provide an answer to these questions. How they speak of themselves and, more significantly, how they
identify themselves during this critical point in time will speak volumes about Iraq’s future.

Eight people in my family have been killed as a result of the war, occupation, and the unprecedented cycle of violence that has ensued since 2003. Yet, never were there any family deliberations over the murderers’ sect or ethnic backgrounds. The 2003 Iraq war has called the very meaning of Iraqi identity into question. Now more than ever, Iraqi sectarian and ethnic identities have assumed larger roles in Iraq’s political conflict due to a sectarianism discourse, infighting along sectarian and ethnic lines, and the internalization of these divides. This development poses the question of what role confessional and ethnic classifications have in Iraqis’ identities and self-narratives.

Many policymakers, the media, and lawmakers have argued that communal identities reign supreme in Iraq, a country that is composed of disparate communities - Sunni, Shi`i, and Kurdish identities. For instance, in the run up to the passing of the Iraqi Constitution in 2005, Ivan Eland (senior fellow and director, the Independent Institute) claimed that Iraq was an artificial state created by the British after World War I and that it has no national identity or tradition of political pluralism. He explained further: “Similar to Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, Iraq’s ethnic and religious factions have been forced together by brute force and authoritarian rule.” This simplistic

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3 In this thesis, the sectarianism discourse is one that refers to the perceived inherent religious sectarian and ethnic differences in Iraqi society. While sectarianism is usually referred to in a religious context, I use it broadly to address the cycle of religious and ethnic targeted violence in Iraq.

4 While all modern nation-states are artificial constructs, Iraq is often cited as being uniquely artificial.


6 Ibid.
position can lead to disastrous proposals, such as Paul Bremer’s quota system and the initial wording of the Biden Resolution.\textsuperscript{7} A nuanced and multi-layered understanding of Iraqi identity remains to be pursued. Therefore, this thesis seeks to speak to the prevailing destructive discourse that sectarianism is some essential phenomenon in Iraqi society.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This thesis has two aims: (1) to insert my findings into the larger academic discussion on the various representations of diasporic identity and memory, as well as (2) to explore their link to homeland conflict by focusing on a sample of the Iraqi diasporic community, which thus far has been largely understudied. Moreover, my work seeks to address misperceptions and offer a corrective to the understanding of Iraqi society, its makeup, and the ongoing discussions of its political future. I use the word corrective comfortably, as a majority of my interviewees’ self-narratives and assertions are shaped by, or in opposition to, US media and policy discourses. According to the authors of \textit{Diaspora and Hybridity}:

The institutions that sponsor and promote the circulation of key academic terms seem less likely than ever to be places that encourage critical questions (or answers) about (to) the urgent politics of today. Rather, there is an ever starker contrast between the symbolic capital used by those building coalitions to “Stop the War” and those using the language of diaspora and hybridity.\textsuperscript{8}

To a certain degree Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk are correct: the ivory towers of academia and the intellectual histories of the terminologies are difficult to place in a larger urgent

\textsuperscript{7} A resolution proposed by Senator Joseph Biden in the Senate. Its initial wording proposed to divide Iraq along three ethno-sectarian lines. Eventually the wording of this resolution changed dramatically to only propose that there should be federalism in Iraq.

political discussion. However, this is over-simplified. As we see in the field of Middle East studies, for example, Edward Said’s work shaped the discourse on East and West relations in a way that is widely used across academic and non-academic realms today. By taking part in the philosophical discussion on diasporic identity, I seek to be part of academic work that offers correctives to governmental actions and faulty analyses that do not necessarily take the people’s account into perspective.

Although significant work has been done on the Arab diasporic communities in the United States, the Iraqi diasporic community remains largely understudied, and limited literature is available on it. This study serves as a pioneer effort to begin a discussion of identity-formation in the Iraqi diasporic community. Linda S. Walbridge and T. M. Aziz offer an informative piece on Iraqi refugees who came to Detroit during the early- to mid-1990s in their article “After Karbala: Iraqi Refugees in Detroit.” They address these refugees’ general concerns in terms of housing, healthcare, and settling in a new land. Their work could be considered an overview of a new refugee community in the area.

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9 Ibid., 2.
Two other works are more significant to my particular topic. The work of Nadje Al-Ali on Iraqi women in the global diaspora provides narratives of women’s pasts and seeks to provide a historical context to Iraq’s current situation by describing events that have impacted its people across its religious, political, and class spectrums.\textsuperscript{12} Her book, which is just as much about the past as the present, examines the relationship of experience, memory and truth, and the varying memories Iraqi women have of events in Iraqi history. Evelyn Alsultany’s\textsuperscript{13} work on race in the United States does not so much delve into the historical readings of Iraqi history as much as it analyzes how the changing American context impacts Iraqis’ negotiations of race in the United States. After 9/11, she notes, Iraqis were afraid of identifying with Iraq due to the hostile environment vis-à-vis Arabs and Muslims as well as of being targeted by the Ba’thi government.\textsuperscript{14}

I diverge from these authors by specifically looking at identity-formation by members of the Iraqi diaspora in the United States. To my knowledge and through extensive research, this preliminary study is the first of its kind. Similar to Al-Ali, I utilize memories and historical recollections as analytical models that impact how they define themselves. Like Alsultany, who cites political context as a contributor to self-narrative, I also argue that my interviewees’ narratives are part of a larger national and global context that has taken root since the 2003 Iraq war. How Iraqis speak of themselves is largely impacted by how they are referred to in a larger discourse sustained by the Western

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
media, government, policy think tanks, and cultural displays – a discourse that seeks to emphasize sectarian and ethnic differences, as Reidar Visser eloquently points out in his article “The Western Imposition of Sectarianism on Iraqi Politics”: 15

By 2007, a sectarian master narrative had emerged as the dominant framework for discussions of Iraqi politics in European and North American media, academic, and policy-making circles. The narrative had become pervasive: No matter how absurd or self-contradictory the sectarian interpretation of a given series of events, it would still prevail over alternative readings.16

Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argue that there is a necessary distinction that must be made is between self-identification and the identification and categorization of oneself by others. According to these scholars, “External identification is itself a varied process. In the ordinary ebb and flow of social life, people identify and categorize others, just as they identify and categorize themselves.”17 The second and more relevant point on external identification discussed by Brubaker and Cooper, is based in “the formalized, codified, objectified systems of categorization developed by powerful and authoritative institutions.”18

The modern state has been one of the most important agents of identification and categorization in this latter sense. In culturalist extensions of the Weberian sociology of the state, notably those influenced by Bourdieu and Foucault, the state monopolizes, or seeks to monopolize, not only legitimate physical force but also legitimate symbolic force, as Bourdieu puts it. This includes the power to name, to identify, to categorize, to state what is what and who is who.19

16 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 15.
19 Ibid., 16.
In the case of the Iraqis I spoke with, it is a state that is not their own but rather one that started a war in their country and has categorized Iraqi society. The dominant sectarianism discourse that has developed in the United States has had a dramatic impact on the self-narratives of the interviewees. Their memories of their pasts, readings of the present, and their hopes for the future have come to revolve around this notion that Iraq society is fragmented and in disarray without any history of communal co-existence.

Brubaker and Cooper cite Charles Tilly and say however that categorization creates “organizational work” as various groups, such as social movements, contest certain identifications and categories.\(^\text{20}\) A majority of the people I spoke have contested sectarian or ethnic identities and created self-narratives that counter the sectarianism discourse. Lamya’s refusal to be identified as any ethnic or sectarian label is not only a direct response to the sectarianism discourse, but is representative of a majority of my interview subjects. Visser’s work establishes the framework of the sectarianism discourse to which I am referring and that will be discussed in chapter 3.

1.3 Methodology

The interviews were conducted between December 2007 and May 2008. I conducted seventy-seven extensive interviews with members of the Iraqi community in the DC-Metropolitan\(^\text{21}\) area. While I had access to the larger Iraqi community throughout the United States (especially in Michigan, California, and Tennessee), time constraints and feasibility did not permit me to conduct interviews nationwide. That endeavor will be part

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{21}\) The DC-Metropolitan area includes Washington DC, Northern Virginia, and the Maryland cities surrounding DC.
of a larger project to collect the oral histories of Iraqis who have migrated to the United States and Europe at large. The interviewees consisted of forty-seven men and thirty women ranging in age from twenty-one to seventy-five.

Due to my personal connection to the community, I utilized a snowball sampling method to locate the interviewees. Each interview lasted two to three hours and took place in the interviewees’ homes. I conducted face-to-face interviews so that I may capture the nuances of the interviewees, as well as their body language and facial expressions. Most of the interviews were one-on-one; seven of them were family interviews. I was both a listener and an active participant, because I both discussed and offered my own opinions on the issues being analyzed. I recorded more than half of the interviews, as well as took detailed notes of the interviewees’ responses. I did not tape-record those individuals who felt uncomfortable with being recorded. The interviews spanned the diverse ethnic and religious communities of Iraqi society: Arabs, Kurds, Turkomen, Chaldeans, Armenians, Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Yazidis. I divided the interviewees along class lines, level of religiosity, and political views vis-à-vis the 2003 Iraq war.

Many writings on Iraq offer chronological accounts of how particular parts of Iraq’s history have impacted a particular group, especially the Shi’a and Kurds. I do not follow this approach, as I believe that this sectarianism discourse has led to a disastrous cycle of violence in Iraq. As Al-Ali says: “It is important to emphasize that these are relatively new paradigms for classifying Iraqis. For until very recently, difference has been

22 Although a majority of the interviewees were middle to upper class.
experienced largely in relation to social class, place of residence, urban or rural identity, professional background, political orientation, and generation." As my thesis will later reveal, most of the interviewees largely denounced these sectarian and ethnic divisions. However in some instances, sectarian identity has effects on interaction and presentation of self even in the United States. Therefore, I do not underestimate the role of sectarian and ethnic identities, especially in today’s context, and the very fact that I am researching the topic of identity attests to this. As cultural critic Kobena Mercer observes, “identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis.”

The interviews began with a basic question of how they identify themselves. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first set of questions focused on their memories of Iraq; the second set on leaving, moving to, and living in the United States as part of a diaspora; and the third set on their opinions of the war, the occupation, and the current sectarian violence, as well as how these elements impact their identity.

1.4 Main Research Questions

I trace the interviewees’ self-narratives from their time in Iraq until the present day. I also examine if and how their identity has been affected since leaving Iraq and, more specifically, after the 2003 Iraq war. The main questions I examine are:

- Who constitutes the Iraqi diaspora?
- What are Iraqis’ memories of Iraq, and how do they play into their self-narratives today?
- What are the various modes of self-identification in the Iraqi diasporic community?

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What does the future of the Iraqi diasporic community look like?

1.5 Main Thesis Argument and Thesis Framework

Saddam Hussein’s government’s close surveillance of the population transcended the national boundaries and instilled a fear in Iraqis worldwide of speaking out about Iraq (excluding such politically active opposition movements as the Iraqi National Congress in London) and, specifically, the government. This thesis expands on the study of diaspora by disclosing the views and narratives of a community that was silenced due to years of homeland conflict and provides an insight into their roles and the role of their memories in their self-narratives and identity-formation. Therefore, it is very much about the past, the present, and the future simultaneously, for the Iraqis’ past is retold through their memories, which are, in turn, selectively chosen as a result of the current situation, specifically the ongoing violence in Iraq. Their conceptions of the past are significant for the question of identity, as they present competing narratives of what it means to be an individual who was born and raised within the territorial political boundary of Iraq.

This thesis uses the present as a starting ground for their interpretations of their past and how they construct their memories as tools to understand current realities. Their memories are not static, for they are influenced by their reactions to the present-day situation. What the interviewees chose to include and exclude from the interviews are based on the picture they wanted to present of themselves and their homeland. Certainly, the political repression of various governments, wars, sanctions, and current American

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25 The “past” refers to their memories, the “present” refers to post-2003 Iraq, and the “future” refers to their hopes for a post-occupation Iraq.
occupation were discussed as parts of their own self-narratives. However, they did not merely narrate their interpretation of these events; rather, they spoke of their lived experiences and how they impacted the decisions they made and their self-narratives. While individually rewriting their interpretations of history, they were taking part in an empowering process, for the repressive Saddam government had silenced them for the last three decades. Many of them were still wary of being recorded and cringed at the sight of a tape recorder. Being part of the same community, I noticed contradictions in various stories as well as personal editing of narratives during the interviews.

I use the interviewees’ narrations, stories, and memories as resources to delve into their identity-formations and weave in my own personal narratives, realizations, and anecdotes. Their varied perspectives and retelling of the past and the present provide, in turn, great insight into Iraq’s political future. In addition, their historical narratives speak not only to a time of unity, but also to a time of division and sectarianism. While some lay down the rules as to what it means to be from “the political territorial boundary of Iraq,” others present accounts of what it means to be Kurdish, Iraqi, or a member of a particular sect. Significantly, in what could be interpreted as a sign of sorrow or disillusionment with the current situation, many boast of their American-ness or global citizenship while labeling Iraq as a “place of birth.”

Many diasporic Iraqis, and the majority of the interviewees, have frozen their past in memory in order to cope with the perplexing present, and they project this frozen past as a refuge for their identity onto the future. Iraqis’ persistent claim that the current situation does not represent the “Real Iraq” alludes to a romanticized idea of the home that is no
longer there. In essence, they identify themselves by a simulacrum of Iraq. My research yielded three modes of self-identity in addition to “Iraqi”\textsuperscript{26}: (1) sect and ethnic identities (especially ethnic identity), (2) non-state identities, and (3) hyphenated identities (viz., largely Iraqi-American identity). Collectively, most of these interviewees dismiss the present and project their nostalgia onto the future in order to salvage their Iraqi national identity and identify with a unified, multicultural, and democratic Iraq.

My thesis is divided into four chapters, in addition to the introduction in Chapter 1 and the conclusion in Chapter 6. Chapter 2 provides a glimpse of Iraqi migration/immigration and introduces the interviewee sample for this study. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework and main concepts that guide this thesis and discusses the past and the present relationship with each other in the formation of the interviewees’ memories and identities. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the past and their memories, as the Iraqi diasporists I spoke with create the “Real Iraq” and identify themselves as the “Real Iraqis” are. Chapter 5 discusses their present-day modes of identification after the diasporists had established themselves in the United States as members of an Iraqi diaspora. Both chapters 4 and 5 also describe the Iraqi diasporic condition through a notion that I label “diasporic (dis)enchantment.” Living through the memories of their pasts, the reality of today, and in the material comfort of the United States, I argue that Iraqis are living in a state of helplessness, limbo, and confusion. Although they are enchanted with Iraq’s past and strongly identify with it, they remain disenchanted as a

\textsuperscript{26} Some of the Kurdish interviewees identified as being Kurdish and as having no connection to the Iraqi state.
result of its uncertain future thereby creating new refuge identities and remaining an inactive diasporic community. Connecting to the homeland as a fantasy, as opposed to a state, makes it difficult for them to determine what their link to Iraq actually is. In the final and concluding chapter, I discuss the interviewees’ perceptions and hopes for Iraq’s future and their status as diasporists in Iraq. I argue that this community may settle in the United States and eventually turn into a permanent ethnic community.
Chapter 2: Meeting the Iraqis

Chapter Summary: This chapter provides a glimpse of Iraqi migration/immigration worldwide and specifically to the DC-metropolitan area; and also introduces the study’s interviewee sample.

2.1 Iraqi Immigration/Migration

For decades, Iraqis have been living in deterritorialized Iraq - the abode of exile, immigrant, and migrant communities worldwide. The majority of them live in Iran, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey; smaller communities exist in Yemen, Lebanon, and the Gulf countries. In 2000, Iraqis were the second largest group of asylum seekers in the Western industrialized countries. In Europe, Iraqi diasporists mostly live in the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden. In the United States, they are concentrated in Washington, DC, Northern Virginia, Detroit, Chicago, Nashville, Los Angeles, and San Diego. They also live in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

The interviewees’ primary pull factors for leaving Iraq and coming to the United States and specifically the DC-Metropolitan area resonate diasporic Iraqis’ reasons for migrating/immigrating worldwide. These factors were: (1) pursuing higher education, (2) being involved in political opposition and escaping due to a fear of persecution, (3) escaping the wars and sanctions for a better and more stable financial future, and (4) joining family members who already live in and are established in the DC-Metropolitan area. The latter factor also has political and economic dimensions. The interviewees can be divided among newer and older “diasporists,” for some of them came during the 1970s.

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28 Ibid.
and 1980s, others came during the refugee and Iraqi migrant rush of the early 1990s, and still others came here only after the 2003 Iraq war began.

The monarchical period ushered in a new system that encouraged Iraq’s brightest students to continue their higher education overseas. This was manifested in the form of government scholarships, which many Iraqis used to leave for Europe or the United States to pursue advanced degrees or obtain further certifications for their medical or other professional licenses. Since the 1940s and throughout the remainder of the century, Iraqis of all religious and ethnic backgrounds have left Iraq for higher education and economic betterment.29 Most of the students were male; however, a number of female students also obtained higher degrees from abroad. In 1976, Mariana went to the Soviet Union to pursue a Ph.D. in geology. “I wanted to be a geologist, and I knew this field was not offered in Iraq. My dad was a staunch supporter of his daughters’ education, more than his sons,’ so I went to Russia and I earned my Ph.D. I even wrote my dissertation in Russian – something I am very proud of until this day.”30 Mariana comes from a Chaldean background. Her decision to move was merely based on a desire to seek higher education. In fact, many of the earliest Iraqi immigrants to the United States were Chaldean and Assyrian. They initially started as all-male communities, but eventually decided to settle permanently and brought their families over.31

Not all Iraqis who left Iraq, however, were on government scholarships. Parents who could afford to pay for their children’s undergraduate and graduates studies, especially in

medical, engineering, or other professional or scientific fields, frequently sent them abroad because the technological advancements and facilities available in the United States were superior to what Iraqi universities could offer, despite a strong Iraqi educational system.\textsuperscript{32} Interestingly, those who came on their own for the most part stayed in the United States. According to one interviewee, it made no sense for him to return, given the repressive nature of the Saddam government and “the attractiveness of the American dream.”\textsuperscript{33} Once he began working, obtained permanent residence, married, and started a family here, he saw little benefit or reason to return to a country that could not offer him the same comforts.

The 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s ushered in a classic chain of migration by relatives who felt encouraged to migrate by the first generation’s economic success. From the late-1950s onward, economic migrants and students were joined by political exiles.\textsuperscript{34} Competing visions of the nation arose at the time of Iraq’s conception, as Sami Zubaida points out in his article “The Fragments Imagine the Nation,” persisted throughout Iraq’s early modern history.\textsuperscript{35} Pan-Arab, Islamic, communist, and nationalist flags were under the guise of the Iraqi nation and state.\textsuperscript{36} Many of the interviewees argued that these competing visions were allowed to rise due to the relatively tolerant policies of the monarchical period. In post-1958 Iraq, the governments that took over spoke in the name

\textsuperscript{32} Randa Kayyali. \textit{The New Americans: The Arab Americans}. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005 p. 34.  
\textsuperscript{33} Omar [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 1 March 2008.  
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
of an Iraqi nationalism that was inherently their leaderships’ nationalism, not one that was inclusive of all communities within Iraq’s territorial boundaries. The disappointment following the post-1958 coups and governments, all of which failed to achieve their announced goals, quickly debilitated these types of nationalist movements. While some participated in the Ba`ath regime mostly out of fear, others chose to stay away from politics and government. Over time, the political and economic situations began to become exceedingly unbearable for Iraqi society.

After the 1958 revolution, many Iraqis associated with the monarchy left; many communists fled persecution after the 1963 and 1968 coups. Throughout the Ba`ath period (1968-2003), male and female opposition activists of all ethnic and religious backgrounds and across the political spectrum (e.g., communists, Nasserists, democrats, and Islamists) fled government repression. From 1969 onward, many Fayli Kurds (Kurdish Shi`a) were deported to Iran. During the 1970s and 1980s, there were further large-scale deportations of Shi`a on the grounds that they were of Iranian origin. Iraqi Kurds have suffered a long history of repression and dispersion. During the mid-1970s, open war broke out between the Iraqi regime and the Kurdish movement under the leadership of Mustafa Barzani. During this time, approximately 200,000 Kurds fled to Iran while thousands more were displaced in the south. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), great atrocities were committed against the Kurds because Saddam feared their cooperation with the Iranians. The ensuing Anfal campaign destroyed villages and led to

38 Ibid., 54.
39 Ibid.
the gassing of thousands.\textsuperscript{40} Consequently, large numbers of Iraqis escaped to Iran, Turkey, and Syria – some temporarily and others never to return.\textsuperscript{41}

From 1990 to 2003, Iraqis migrated due to a mixture of economic and political factors.\textsuperscript{42} Indeed, the economic situation, which progressively worsened after the Iran-Iraq War, the 1991 Gulf War, and the U.S./United Nations-imposed sanctions, gave most Iraqis little incentive to return; rather, such events gave them all the more reasons to stay away. Life became unbearable even for those who were in the upper echelons of Iraqi society, because Iraq was disconnected from the world as well as from all new technological and global developments and advancements. Many of the interviewees stated that they saw their lives going nowhere and that there was very little left for them in Iraq. For those who had family members in the United States, the move was easier because their family network allowed them to integrate quickly into the American social fabric.

The political dimensions mostly revolved around the Saddam era, when independent movements were being established to overthrow the Saddam government. The Peshmerga\textsuperscript{43} were involved in resistance movements against the Saddam government from 1982 to 1988 in Mosul, Baghdad, and Kurdish areas. Mariana, although she is not Kurdish, joined them to fight against the government and for Kurdish independence. This landed her and her family in political trouble, and she was forced into exile in Europe. It

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{43} Kurdish armed forces.
was not until the 2003 Iraq war, when she was finally able to communicate directly with her family instead of relying on third parties. During the 1991 Gulf War, the failed uprising against Saddam forced many Iraqis to flee. Many Iraqi Kurds and Shi’a escaped after their failed uprising attempts against Saddam’s regime in 1991. Quite a few of them initially ended up in the Rafha refugee camp in Saudi Arabia. Even if Iraqis were not directly involved in the uprising, there was a sense that they were “fed up” with the government and wanted a release from what they saw as living in a prison. Additionally, the draining of the southern marshlands increased the hardship and repression of the Marsh Arabs, which led to their eventual expulsion and move to Iran.44 Saddam’s regime used displacement and forced resettlement to crush political opposition, punish opponents, and secure valuable resources.45

Finally, thirteen years of the most comprehensive sanctions system ever imposed on any country (1990-2003) led to severe economic deterioration and a terrible humanitarian crisis. Most recently, during and after the 2003 Iraq war, millions of Iraqis fled Iraq. Although all of them treasured the security that the United States provided them, many did not see their migration as permanent, particularly those who fled because of dire circumstances (e.g., war or sanctions). They expected to return when peace and job opportunities were restored, however most did not.46 While some did, many decided to stay in the United States to establish permanent residency. Some were discouraged by Iraq’s economic and political situation, and others had established connections through

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46 Ibid., 34. At the time, these individuals would have been considered migrants rather than immigrants.
their universities and ultimately found good jobs. Some of those scholarship students who did go back soon found themselves forced to leave again because the economic pressures were just too great. As a result they returned to the United States to establish their retirement or join their children and families. Table 1 displays the latest statistics of Iraqis living in the United States.

**Table 1: Foreign-Born Population: Iraq (Does not include the children of native Iraqis in its calculations)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>89,890</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>US Citizenship and Period of US Entry</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturalized US Citizen</td>
<td>45,600</td>
<td>50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entered 1990 to 2000</td>
<td>9,445</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entered 1980 to 1989</td>
<td>12,495</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entered before 1980</td>
<td>23,660</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a US citizen</td>
<td>44,295</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entered 1990 to 2000</td>
<td>36,775</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entered 1980 to 1989</td>
<td>4,415</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entered before 1980</td>
<td>3,120</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2 Attitudes

Before the 2003 Iraq war, Iraqis’ political views in the DC-metropolitan area were difficult to gauge. Even within this diasporic community, people’s knowledge of particular families, their pasts and their involvement with the Iraqi government would allow them to classify various individuals and families as Ba’thi loyalists, anti-government, spies, and traitors. Politics, or at least Iraqi politics, was rarely a topic of conversation. A high level of mistrust, similar to that found in Iraq’s, resonated throughout this community. There were the select few who were regarded as Ba’thi

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loyalists and spies and who would scare people away at dinner parties, as others were scared about coming to the attention of those in Iraq’s palaces. However, there was an underlying tone of anger, resentment, and frustration with the Saddam government – a government that forced them to leave their country, become disconnected from their families, and destroyed their homeland and its potential. This anger became evident on the eve of the 2003 Iraq war, when many more Iraqis than expected supported Saddam’s ousting – not necessarily the war, but certainly getting rid of him. “Enough was enough” for many Iraqis.

Political discussions revealed many of the erroneous stereotypes that had been imposed upon Iraqi society since the 2003 Iraq war, among them the myths that all the Shi’a are staunch supporters of the war while all the Sunna are against it due to their ties to the Saddam government. These generalizations, which do contain a certain element of truth, are for the most part superficial misrepresentations of the deeper issues that were really taking place in the people’s minds. Except for a few Ba’ath and Saddam supporters, the issue was never one of whether Iraqis wanted Saddam to be overthrown or not.

For many of my interviewees, regardless of their various ethnic and sectarian lines, Saddam’s overthrow was a top priority. Rather, the issue was that the United States government and some Iraqi exiles [many who were ex-Ba’ath] were playing a game. What were their intentions, and what was going to take place afterward? While many of the Iraqis I interviewed did not want to see their country bombed by a “foreign occupier”

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48 Arabic plural for Sunni.
[the United States], they saw no other alternative to get rid of the Saddam government that had controlled their country for over thirty years. Various camps developed: some along sectarian, ethnic, or other lines; some supported the war and wanted to get rid of Saddam as quickly as possible; others continued to support the war even after the violence unfolded; and still others began to regret their initial thoughts as they “did not know it was going to turn out like this” [referring to the cycle of violence in Iraq]. There were also people who were staunchly against the war and did not see the American involvement and incursion into Iraq as a solution to its woes. Rather, they murmured a tone that resembled the words of one gentleman in the acclaimed independent film “About Baghdad”: “The student is gone, and now the teacher is back to replace him,”49 (this refers to Saddam’s regime being replaced by American forces). The final camp is one of disillusionment, people who wanted Saddam to be ousted but at the same time were against war and the tragedy that it would bring. Iraqi Arabs and Kurds and the various minority groups can be found in each of these camps.

Conversations and arguments over Iraq’s future were frequent, and some of them were more hostile than others. One of these is the old Ba’thi vs. non-Ba’thi camps, which now took on the face of being pro-war and anti-war, as Ba’thi loyalists were accused of opposing the war out of loyalty to the Saddam regime. In fact, many anti-war Iraqis were seen as Ba’thi apologists by the other camp. The anti-war camp replied that such a view was far from the truth, for who would want Saddam to continue ruling their country? But

49Sinan Antoon, Bassam Haddad, Maya Mikdashi, Adam Shapiro, and Suzy Salamy, About Baghdad (InCounter Productions, 2004), documentary. The student is referring to Saddam Hussein, and the teacher is referring to the United States.
on the other hand, they asked, who would want the United States to destroy it? One man, Ali, who called himself a Ba’thi ideologist, said that he always supported Ba’thi thinking before it was perverted by the Saddam and the Hafez al-Asad governments, for many people think I was against the war because I was a Ba’athi ideologist. This is far from the truth. I hate Saddam for perverting an idea that could have flourished into something beautiful for Iraq. But I love Iraq too much. I love my family and my home and my cities and my street too much. I cannot see another country’s fighter jets and planes and tanks come in and destroy my country.\(^\text{50}\)

### 2.3 Dollars

Today, Arab-Americans can be found in every profession, although 88 percent of them work in the private sector.\(^\text{51}\) While some Iraqis own their own businesses, most of them are professionals. The 2000 US Census Bureau found that 73 percent of Arab-Americans work in managerial, professional, technical, sales, or administrative fields.\(^\text{52}\) Their locality reflects the type of work. According to Randa Kayyali, the wealthiest Arab-American community is in Washington, DC, and Northern Virginia, where many Arab elites moved and resided, particularly in Fairfax County. The majority of the Iraqi Arab community is concentrated in the Northern Virginia area. Many of the Iraqi Arabs who were interviewed in Virginia were, in fact, residents of Fairfax County, while others lived in Maryland and Washington, DC.\(^\text{53}\)

The families mainly constitute a “diasporic elite.” Many of the men and women are doctors, lawyers, engineers, business owners, professors, and have at least a bachelor’s

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\(^\text{50}\) Ali [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 10 February 2008.

\(^\text{51}\) Kayyali, 100-01.

\(^\text{52}\) Ibid., 101.

\(^\text{53}\) Ibid., 101.
degree; many had also earned their masters and doctorate degrees or had completed other graduate education programs. While many of the women continued to work here, focusing on raising their children gradually became a priority, for the extended family support and outside help afforded to them financially and culturally in Iraq was no longer available to them.

Coming mainly during the 1990s, the Iraqi Kurds I interviewed maintain a middle-class income level. While some families who came before the 1990s are more affluent, one Iraqi Kurdish interviewee said: “It is a community that is large but is still developing itself financially and economically.”

It is important to note that the Kurdish community in this area is large and that while twenty-four of the interviewees were Kurdish, they are by no means representative of the entire community.

2.4 Worship: Levels of Religiosity and Sectarian Sentiment

The interviewees’ levels of religiosity and sectarian sentiment can be divided into four categories: (1) religious and sectarian, (2) religious and non-sectarian, (3) secular and sectarian, and (4) secular and non-sectarian. Despite the commotion about sectarian fighting in Iraq, many of the Iraqis I interviewed do not identify with their religion. Rather, they have developed their own interpretations of what their religion is to them, claiming that religion is a vertical relationship with God and not a horizontal one with society; others have become disillusioned with religion after its use, or rather misuse, in the ongoing violence. This is indicative of a collective reasoning happening in a community that perceives religion to be a divisive element in the current circumstances.

The Iraq they remember is linked to a secular society that did not emphasize religious differences and not home to religious extremism, but rather celebrated ethnic and religious plurality. Almost unanimously, the interviewees blamed the violence on religious extremists and on external forces such as al-Qaeda, Syria, Iran, America, Israel, and various terrorist organizations, but not on Iraqis. If the perpetrators of violence were Iraqis, then they would qualify it by saying “these are not ‘Real Iraqis,’” a concept that will be further delved into in chapters 4 and 5.

2.5 Internalizing a Discourse

During visits to Iraq after the 2003 Iraq war and to Syria in 2007, I asked many people what they thought had caused the current cycle of violence. Their answers resembled those of my interviewees; however, they said that they have become scared and more careful vis-à-vis the other sect.

Many of those who I interviewed in the diaspora assert that the militias and external forces are causing the sectarian violence. In Iraq, people are being forced to think along these lines as internal displacement is creating homogenous communities out of what used to be mixed neighborhoods and areas. According to Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner, “Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq,” thousands of Iraqis have been forced to flee their homes and conceal their identities out

55 Many of the interviewees explained that the Iraqis who are living in Iraq today are not the “Real Iraqis.” This notion will be further explicated in Chapters one and two.
of fear. In an interview with Steve Inskeep on National Public Radio, Tanner said that formerly mixed areas in Baghdad are no longer mixed.\(^57\)

Even though many people do not know who has killed their family members, they have internalized the sectarian dimension as the most plausible explanation in the absence of any clear cause or reason. "People are changing their identity cards, or are carrying a couple of them,"\(^58\) Tanner says. "People are changing the ring tones on their cell phones. We heard of people in Sunni areas loading Shi’a religious songs as ring tones for their cell phone to try and protect themselves when they were in Shi’a areas."\(^59\)

The ongoing sectarian violence and its effects on Iraqis’ self-narratives is best explained by Arjun Appadurai:

> If the hypothesis of treachery is plausible it has much to do with the large-scale identities created, transformed, and reified by modern state apparatuses (often in a transnational and diasporic field) and circulated through the media. When these identities are convincingly portrayed as primary (indeed as primordial) loyalties by politicians, religious leaders, and the media, then ordinary people self-fully seem to act as if only this kind of identity mattered and as if they were surrounded by a world of pretenders. Such representations of identity (and identification) seem even more plausible in a world of migrants and mass media, which can subvert the everyday certainties that come from face-to-face knowledge of the ethnic Other.\(^60\)

Iraqi diasporists, like Iraqis still in the country, have internalized these larger-than-life elements that have at their core the fragmentation of Iraqi society. They are living in a time of utter shock, disbelief, and denial. According to Amir:

> There has been a replacement of Saddam with all these small Saddams. This eventually pushed people to also perform a certain type of sectarianism in the

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\(^58\) Ibid.

\(^59\) Ibid.

public space and how the Americans divided the country in the discourse and the imagination – Kurds, Shi’a, Sunni. This is just ridiculous. It is definitely politicized, played on by local political groups and militias, and of course harnessed by the American mismanagement of the war and their inability to see anything else in this country. This developed tension, a civil war. But this will calm down very quickly, because it is a political decision, not the people’s decision.\footnote{Amir [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, international telephone conversation, 27 December 2007.}

Amir believes that Iraqis in the diaspora do not quite fathom the sectarian violence that has ensued and refuse to label it as an “Iraqi” phenomenon. Many of the interviewees, even those who are more sectarian than others, do not recollect such an intense sense of hatred among Iraqis. As will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters, the interviewees consider this form of sectarianism discourse a political form designed to manipulate Iraqi society in order to retain control, just as previous governments in the country’s recent past have done. Consequently, there has been an individual reaction to this discourse, as seen in their own self-narratives, which are collective in the sense that the interviewees’ responses are quite similar. Regardless of denying any sectarian division in their society, Iraqis have formulated and chosen to remember those of their memories that respond to the sectarianism discourse.

\section*{2.6 Locating the Author}

I include my own autobiography in this narrative, as I am part of the community I am interviewing and choose to reveal my own narrative as an “interpretative retelling.”\footnote{Avtar Brah, \textit{Cartographies of Diaspora} (London: Routledge, 1996), 10.}

Avtar Brah summarizes my thoughts quite eloquently on this subject:

\begin{quote}
\ldots the credibility of this narrative of political moments and events is dependent far less upon the scribbling of an “individual”; the “individual” narrator does not unfold but is produced in the process of narration. Rather, the deeply invested
\end{quote}
self that speaks the events relies heavily upon the hope that its version will resonate with the meaning constructed by my various “imagined communities.”

Reflecting on my thesis topic, interviews, and life experiences, I gradually realized that my entire life has been shaped by “diasporic inscriptions.” Born and raised in the United States to parents of Iraqi origin, I have had two “homes” throughout my life. During the academic year I lived in Northern Virginia (NOVA), a prosperous and affluent area that is home to communities of extremely diverse backgrounds. I attended public school; joined the Girl Scouts in my local mosque; enrolled in swimming, tennis, and ice-skating lessons; and was very much involved in my community.

Home transformed in the summer to my grandfather’s house in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, the largest city in Nineveh province, which is home to Arabs and Kurds, Muslims and Christians, and such smaller minority ethnic and religious communities as the Chaldeans, Assyrians, Shabak, Yazidis, and Jews. It retains an ancient aura, as ruins are visible in between home dwellings and major roads. Family gatherings, trips to the riverbank, and my nationalist grandfather’s Iraqi history lessons all characterized those summers. While growing up, I never once thought that I had to choose one “home” over another “home,” or that I should feel more strongly affiliated to one land than to another.

I was frequently asked, both in the United States and in Iraq (and, more interestingly, on the Jordanian-Iraqi border) whether I felt more Iraqi or American. In my own family

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63 Ibid.
64 Term used by Brah, ibid., 1.
65 A unique minority of Kurdo-Arabs who are indigenous to and only live in Iraq.
66 Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the Iraqi Jewish community has greatly decreased in number.
upbringing, I was never taught to favor one over the other – I was very much both American and Iraqi. Nor did I really ask myself what it meant to be one or the other or both. This was an attribute that my parents taught all of their children to be proud of – we were the products of two great nations and traditions. In fact, the first real instance of realizing my “difference” was during the first Gulf War in the early 1990s. In Iraq, the United States was conducting bombing runs, while on my elementary school’s playground one classmate was chasing me and screaming: “Ha ha! My people are killing your people!” Instantly, I was excluded from a particular sub-set of “people.” At the young age of six, I could not fully understand this event’s meaning or implications on my own self-narrative - and it baffles me to this day that she was able to make such a pronouncement at such a young age.

Without my realizing it, the young girl’s cruelty helped shaped my own self-narrative and how I identify and speak of myself. My biography was becoming part of a collective history of Iraqis who had moved to the United States. This history is rooted in a country that possesses natural as well as human resources, but has been plagued with successive destructive regimes. Many Iraqis initially left to receive higher education in the West. However, as news from Iraq told of a deteriorating situation, many of them decided to postpone their return until the situation improved in their “homeland.” Yet the number of Iraqi migrants steadily increased, as they could no longer bear the political and economic burdens that continued to worsen. Although they may have had high hopes of returning to Iraq one day, many ended up settling in the United States. Even though I was born and
raised here, I felt that I was marked as different, and that, in turn, made me feel that I was different.

As I grew older, I conceptualized this incident in its broader and contextual meanings. My parents had decided to move to the United States, and I was a product of that move. Their decision was not to disconnect from Iraq; rather, it was part of a larger migratory, and at the time temporary movement to Western countries in order to pursue higher education and escape the Saddam Hussein government. The Iran-Iraq War prevented them from returning, out of fear that my father might be conscripted into the army. They did not think that our traditions and customs contradicted the American way of life; however, uniquely Iraqi and Arab traditions and religious teachings were held in high regard. Our economic and social upbringing was no different from those of my classmates. However, I gradually developed a worldview that differed from that of many of my classmates, especially in regard to Middle Eastern affairs. The playground incident foreshadowed classroom arguments and involvement with projects that called for a better American foreign policy in Iraq and the Middle East as well as for humanitarian work in Iraq, considering the deteriorating situation there due mainly to the U.S./United Nations-imposed sanctions and Saddam’s continued repression.

The 2003 Iraq war ushered in a new wave of involvement – primarily anti-war, anti-racism, and refugee work – that have had a profound impact upon my intellectual and philosophical pursuits. A growing frustration that the everyday Iraqi’s voice was not
being represented, led to my pursuing this thesis.\textsuperscript{67} Along with several other family members, my aunt and uncle were killed on June 19, 2004, and my cousin on March 26, 2005. These still resonate in my mind, as I was in Iraq for the first tragic incident and my cousin was like a brother to me. As I related the story to various people and at various speaking events and panels, many would ask me if the Shi`a had killed them, concluding that I am Sunni since my family is from Mosul. In reality, to this day we do not know who killed my aunt, my uncle, and my cousin. Moreover, I have never heard the word “Shi`a” uttered in family deliberations over who may have done it.

However, the danger of these questions is their use and interpretation in the positions of power in the Green Zone and Washington, DC, as when Bremer initiated a quota system in Iraq’s Constitution and, more recently, Senator Joseph Biden proposed dividing Iraq into three distinct areas along ethno-sectarian lines.\textsuperscript{68} In late 2007, this plan developed into a resolution. Joining a few other Iraqis, we spoke to various Congressional offices about the dangers of such a division and the imposition on the right of a sovereign people to decide its own fate. We circulated a petition that drew hundreds of signatures worldwide within hours – a truly revolutionary move, as Iraqis would have never dared to put their name on a political statement more than five years ago; not surprisingly, many who signed labeled themselves as “anonymous.” After congressional deliberation, the resolution’s final wording, ultimately, excluded this type of federalism.

For these personal and familial reasons as well as my deep involvement, I speak of

\textsuperscript{67} I was extremely cautious of the questionnaire I developed, ensuring that there were no misleading questions that would make the interviewees answer one way over another.

myself as an Iraqi in diaspora, among other identities. While I never really lived in Iraq, I remain diasporically enchanted with my parents’ place of birth, my extended family’s home, and a nation that has shaped my own self-narrative.

2.7 Research Limitations

As an Iraqi-American who grew up in Northern Virginia, my research was facilitated by my knowledge of and access to the Iraqi community in the sample area. However, being Iraqi does not necessarily simplify the interview process; in fact, it complicates it for a number of reasons. The kindness, hospitality and generosity of the families and individuals I interviewed cannot be forgotten – the abundance of good meals, teas, and desserts recalled the traditions I saw in Iraq every summer. Yet Iraqis are not used to being interviewed, or divulging a great amount of their inner thoughts, opinions, and ideas. I cannot emphasize enough the fear that Saddam’s regime instilled in the Iraqi psyche and mind. To a certain degree, this fear and skepticism still exists in many of their minds, and some (but not all) of what they say is guarded. Furthermore, the treatment of Arabs and Muslims in the United States after 9/11 also forces many to remain hesitant and guarded when it comes to exercising their complete freedom of speech. While they provide their accounts, they also provide them in the environment of the current historical context in post 9/11 America and post-2003 Iraq, and via my position as the interviewer; consequently I was more than often left with a feeling that their accounts are not necessarily complete.

In addition, more than being seen as a Master’s student conducting research, I am seen as an Iraqi woman or young lady from their community who is walking into their
private lives and homes and asking them personal and emotional questions. This was extremely evident as I received six marriage proposals throughout the interview process, as mothers and siblings of available bachelors felt I fit the image of the proper “young Iraqi-woman” who would be most suitable for their son or brother. Significantly, my sect and at times even religion did not play a role in these proposals. I was therefore viewed more as a member of their community than an academic researcher or anthropologist conducting fieldwork.

For many, there was a desire to understand why I would be interested in such a topic and what I hoped to accomplish. One gentleman, Saeed, vehemently said “but even if you do not know the people, we know who you are, and you are Iraqi. People will not tell you everything.”69 Another suggested that I ask an “American blonde haired blue-eyed friend”70 to conduct the interviews instead, as people may be more open with her.71 My last name automatically places me in a particular religious group, sect, and background, all of which affects the levels of information provided by the interviewees. A person who is not of my sect, despite the important fact that I do not identify with a sect, might feel uncomfortable sharing information out of fear of “offending me” or of me repeating what he/she has said to other community members.

However, this does not mean that I received untrue accounts of their self-narratives. In fact, many were quite open and expressed comfort, happiness, and relief in speaking with me about topics that have been stored in their minds and hearts for years. If they did

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70 Rayan [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 18 December 2007.
71 Ibid.
not prefer to be tape recorded, they simply told me. I make these remarks only to stress that some statements and interviews could have been impacted by virtue of who I am, my family name, my gender and age, what is known about me in the community, as well as the domestic and foreign political contexts that exist today.

Furthermore, this sample is representative only of the Iraqis who live in the DC-metropolitan area. But even that is difficult to achieve, as each individual’s experience and narrative tells a different story. The abundance of faiths, ethnicities, views, length of time in the United States, and political opinions vary greatly. I would like to maintain that I do not claim to present a representative sample for the following reasons: (1) for the most part, the interviewees represent an educated and professional elite. Since the DC-Metropolitan area is affluent, most of them form part of a “diasporic elite” who, at a minimum, have a middle-class income. Hence the interviews are skewed toward the more educated and affluent responses than toward the lower socio-economic echelons. Although I do not have a quantitative figure to prove this, their financial status was apparent through their conversations, homes, and professions; (2) not all ethnic and religious minorities are represented, as they do not all live within the geographic field of research; and (3) not all political views are represented. Consequently, I do not claim to be making conclusions on behalf of the entire Iraqi diaspora in this country, but merely limit my analysis and findings to the interview sample.
2.8 Clarifying the Subject of Study

The prime difficulty of this research has been grounding narratives in reality. While many Iraqis insist that there are no differences or conflicts between the country’s various sects and ethnicities, the current level of violence tells a different story. Furthermore, the changing relationship dynamics among Iraqis, although quite under cover, do not really support the assertion that “things are still the same between them.” As many members of the diaspora are linked to modern-day Iraq in one form or another, there is an increasing need to reexamine the exact title and topic of this paper. Accordingly, this research is an argument with its own author, for it interrogates the very notion of “Iraqi identity.” I place “Iraqi identity” in quotation marks and say it with a great deal of hesitation because I feel that “Iraqi” is a limiting adjective of a far more complex understanding of the interviewees’ identities.

More specifically, by the third interview, I had dropped the phrase entirely and qualified my interviews by stating that I was seeking to interview individuals who “were born and lived within the political territorial boundary of 1921 Iraq.” But those who identify with Mesopotamian-ness still find this term very limiting. I therefore asked how they identify themselves vis-à-vis the country in which they were born. There is a deep-rooted meaning behind the rephrasing of that phrase, one that is not only symbolic of migratory, border-crossing, and re-identification processes, but one that is also a statement about the “Iraqi” diasporic nation and its future existence, not to mention Iraq’s political borders and future.

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72 As will be discussed in Chapter 5, some of my interviewees identified with being Mesopotamian.
This study does not seek to present a static definition of what “Iraqi identity” is, since no identity is static, but rather, to problematize how a particular community has been conceived and represented by analyzing its members’ discussions of their stories, memories, and self-narratives. It examines the various manifestations and complexities of self-representations and narratives that have changed and been reformulated, and that have taken on transnational elements and influences through physical space between two distinct lands, as well as an intellectual space of reconciling one’s self through the passage of time, changing global contexts, and current events.

My object of study is the Iraqi diaspora as a diaspora, rather than to deconstruct it according to particular criteria in order to discuss its validity and status in conformity with them. While the Iraqis I interviewed do not fit into the neat package that William Safran or Robin Cohen outline, which will be discussed in chapter 3, the Iraqi diaspora presents new ways of looking at and understanding a diasporic community.

2.8.1 The Iraqi Kurdish Question

The Iraqi Kurds I interviewed provide for an interesting discussion for the way in which I discuss “Iraqi.” The strong call for Kurdish independence made me wonder if Iraqi Kurds in the US would even want to engage with this topic, or if it would offend them. But early in my research, I realized that I was unconsciously reacting to the sectarian narrative that sets Iraqi Kurds apart from Iraqi Arabs. Separating Iraqi Kurds from any discussion of the Iraqi diaspora is problematic and dangerous, for it supposes an

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automatic division between the two and aids the hegemonic sectarian narrative that has emerged.

This thought was further confirmed during an April 2008 conference at which I presented this research. I spoke of the danger of the Kurdish-Arab binary opposition and sought to emphasize the array of opinions on the Kurdistan question even among the Kurds themselves. During the question and answer session, an Iraqi Kurdish woman stood up and said: “I just would like to emphasize that the Kurds are for an Iraqi state. We are against what is happening in Iraq now, we were against the war, and we are for one unified Iraqi state.” Furthermore, I would be reacting to the very sectarian and ethnic discourse that I vehemently oppose in my academic, personal, and activist pursuits if I were to ignore this issue.

The Kurdish interviewees’ various narratives about the Kurdish nation are very useful for one of the overall points of my thesis: while sect and ethnicity are important elements in an individual’s identity and diasporic narrative (although to various degrees), multiple modalities (level of religiosity, class, level of education, age/generation, and political background), all contribute to a person’s identity-formation and diasporic condition. I focus particularly on their notions of the state, which is indicative of how they identify themselves and what they see for the future of Iraq and/or Kurdistan.

The unresolved situation of the Kurds has resulted in one of the numerous longstanding conflicts in Iraq and the Middle East. In the early 1900s, the British

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74 Conference Attendee, Panel Discussion on “Iraqi Nationalism and Identity,” Historians Against the War Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, 12 April 2008.
promised and then denied them an independent state. As a result, Kurds within Iraq continued to live as a “minority group” similar to their Kurdish counterparts in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and present-day Armenia. Worried about the Kurdish nationalist movement, the Ba’ath party under Ahmed Hasan Al-Bakr began to reach out to the Kurdish leadership and appointed three Kurds as ministers in the Iraqi government in July 1968.\footnote{Charles Tripp, \textit{A History of Iraq} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 199.} Two of them were affiliated with Mullah Mustafa Barzani and his Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), and one with the current president, Jalal Talabani, who established the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).\footnote{Al-Ali, \textit{Iraqi Women}, 124} Al-Bakr’s regime tried to play these parties against each other. During this time, Barzani led a military operation and attacked the oil installations in Kirkuk, a contested territory between the Kurds and Baghdad.\footnote{Ibid.} After Baghdad’s military retaliation, secret negotiations took place in 1970 and eventually “recognized Kurdish rights with respect to national identity, the use of Kurdish as a national language alongside Arabic, agrarian reforms and Kurdish political participation.”\footnote{Ibid.} The agreement also promised autonomy to Kurdish-majority areas.

However, Baghdad started an Arabization campaign, forcibly displacing Kurdish families and encouraging Arab families to move to the north.\footnote{Tripp, \textit{History of Iraq}, 214} Not trusting the Ba’ath, Barzani established lines of communication with Iran.\footnote{Al-Ali, \textit{Iraqi Women}, 124} On the ground, the Kurds continued to suffer from an Iraqi security forces crackdown directed against people
linked to the Kurdish national movement.\textsuperscript{81} In 1974, Barzani and his party, along with the National Patriotic Front and two small Kurdish organizations, confronted the Ba`ath and open war broke out once again, creating an exodus of 150,000 civilian refugees who fled to Iran.\textsuperscript{82} Thanks to the Shah’s help and support, the Kurds and the Peshmerga forces were initially winning. However, the Algiers Agreement (1975) between Baghdad and Tehran dealt the Kurds a devastating blow.\textsuperscript{83}

Only during the first Gulf War were the Kurds able to achieve a form of autonomy due to the imposition of U.S./United Nations sanctions on Iraq. Since the early 1990s, the area designated as “Kurdistan” has been worlds apart from Arab Iraq. In fact, many Iraqi Kurds, especially the 1990 generation and onward, have not ventured into the Arab territories and vice versa. I will specifically present their perspective about the future of the Kurdish nation, as it is the most contested and divisive issue in Iraq today.

The British betrayal, as well as that of Baghdad and Tehran, still resonate in the minds of Kurdish diasporists. However, their interpretations of history shed light on the multiple views that they hold today. According to Dara,

\begin{quote}
there are varying contestations about the future of the Kurdish nation. Just like there are separatist movements, there are anti-separatist movements, there are Islamic movements, there are independent village movements, there are various types of political movements, and there are tribal movements that have been historically linked to Baghdad’s central government and in disagreement with the actions of the KDP and PUK, which have rivalries between them.\textsuperscript{84}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 124-25.
\textsuperscript{82} Tripp, \textit{History of Iraq}, 212
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 212. In this agreement, Saddam Hussein and the Shah settled the border disputes between their two countries. Iraq gave up its claim to the Shatt al-Arab waterway, while the Shah agreed to stop supporting Barzani and the Kurdish resistance movement.
\textsuperscript{84} Dara [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 2 January 2008.
These disagreements arise in various narratives, although not necessarily along the same lines. This is extremely important, for the dominant discourse often gives Kurds one voice – usually that of a strong Kurdish nationalist and separatist movement.

I do not mean to diminish the significance of this movement’s ever-increasing strength and its implications for the future of a potential Kurdish nation-state; however, it is important to recognize that it is surrounded by multiple narratives that have their own internal dimensions of education, class, family political orientation, lived experiences, and levels of religiosity. This, in turn, impacts the day-to-day experiences of those Kurds who live in the diaspora, outside of Iraqi Kurdistan. More specifically, at the beginning I felt that most Iraqi Kurds would feel uncomfortable about being interviewed, as this activity revolved around the “Iraqi” nation-state. But only some of them felt this way. In fact, these various perspectives elicited a particular uniqueness to the diaspora community I interviewed. The stories of Dara, Kazhan, Hadar, Rozh, Kochar, Zhala, Lela, Nasaneen, and Mariana are extremely useful in this discussion. These diasporists had various orientations: nationalist Kurd, separatist Kurd, nationalist Iraqi, Islamic, and secular realist. I will give a brief background of each interviewee in order to shed light on a larger point that I wish to make about the diasporic community being studied.

Dara and Kazhan (both raised in Mosul, a city with a predominantly Arab population and a large Kurdish community) and Hadar (raised in Erbil, the capital of the Iraqi Kurdistan) all come from a background that stresses the importance of Islam in their upbringing and identity. They see themselves as Muslims first, but identify as being Iraqis of Kurdish ethnicity. Dara and Kazhan, who were particularly active with Islamic
work that stressed Islamic ideals, were both imprisoned by the Ba`ath regime and persecuted for their activities around Islamic work. Part of their work was devoted to resisting government repression. They never desired to create an Islamic state such as Iran’s, but only sought to promote respect for all religions and end the Ba`ath party. They do not see the struggle between Arab Iraq and Kurdistan as useful, since it takes away from the dialogue of the ummah (the global Islamic community) and seeks to prevent Muslims from seeing larger and more pressing issues. Hadar similarly hopes for a unified Iraq that includes Kurdistan, for “it will make me so sad to see that [a separate Kurdistan].”85 They do not want to see the borders give way to a pan-Islamic region; what they hope for is a unified Iraq, because its division is anti-Islamic in nature and sows more seeds of division than of unity.

Rozh was born, raised, and lived in Mosul until the age of twenty. He comes from a well-known Kurdish family from Dohuk and considers himself to be an ethnically Kurdish Iraqi. He does not see any problems between the Kurdish and Arab peoples, but says that the Ba`ath party intentionally tried to separate them:

The government tried to create tension between the Arabs and the Kurds – and it was for political reasons. I had a lot of Arab friends, and most were in my neighborhood and from school and I played with them. I didn’t see the division, because we had the same interests, we had the same youth. I didn’t feel any political influence on me or on my family. I didn’t feel any discrimination. We did not see it as a problem that we spoke Kurdish at home and were part of the same Iraqi community as our Arab brothers and sisters.86

Kochar sees himself as a non-religious and secular realist. He identifies as Iraqi and actively works with the Iraqi government, as he believes that he has a duty to serve the

86 Rozh [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 3 January 2008.
country in which he was born and raised. He agrees with the interviewees above, but from a radically anti-nationalist perspective. Kochar recently came to the United States to finish his higher education at a prestigious American university. Before that, he worked with the Iraqi government initially in Iraq, and then moved to Amman in 2004. Born and raised in Baghdad, his family is from Erbil, and he grew up in both cities speaking Arabic and Kurdish at the same level. Kochar offers a “practical” point of view to the Kurdish question.

Since 1648, from the Treaty of Westphalia, states have been defining us. So whether Iraq was created 60 or 70 years ago or in 500 BC, it doesn’t matter. At this point, states define us. I would say that I am Iraqi, not Kurdish. That is the state that exists today. But even this is irrelevant – the state was drawn by the British in the early 1920s. Why would I care to identify with a British plot? It is all the same for me. There is nothing wrong with self-determination. Why pick independent Kurdistan or united Iraq? It is nonsense. If you want self-determination, as the Kurds do, you would have to fight for it. And then you would get Turkey upset, and there will be clashes, and then Iran and Syria will follow right after. [An independent] Kurdistan is hard to create in the long term. It just doesn’t make sense. We are part of a united Iraq, and I am Kurdish and I say this. At the end, what does it matter? Look at the society – everyone is fighting to death. Why? People have been living there for generations. At the end – really, if you have rights, then what is the problem – we can all live under the same country. This is about the egos of politicians and their own movements that they want to see actualized.87

Kochar’s views on the creation of a potential Kurdish state are fascinating, for they provide an alternative to the current ongoing discourses as well as some Iraqi Arab suspicions that Kurds are trying to infiltrate the government so they can establish a Kurdish state faster. I have attended many gatherings in which such comments have been made.

87 Kochar [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 3 January 2008.
His cousin Zhala, who was also born and raised in Baghdad, offers a completely different perspective. All of her friends were Arab. She spoke Kurdish at home, but spoke only Arabic when she was outside and with her friends. She would visit Erbil at least once a year in the summer. Initially, she said she was linked only to Baghdad, as she did not identify with the rest of Iraq. She was born in 1966, but her “relationship with Kurdistan” only began to develop in 1991 when the family had to move north for her father’s medical treatment. During that time, Kurdistan became an autonomous region. Zhala says: “It was extremely emotional that Kurdistan was liberated from Saddam.”

After seeing the suffering inflicted on the Kurds and her work with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as a humanitarian aid worker and translator, she asked herself:

Why should Kurdistan be part of Iraq, and why would these people be part of Iraq? There is nothing happy with my relationship with Iraq. Besides my friends, everything was so hard there, and they took away my father’s job because he is Kurdish. I developed strong Kurdish nationalism and was so excited about the Peshmerga and the Kurdish flag. Now I am more pragmatic in the US. I wonder how can I make this come true, how can Kurdistan become more independent?88

Her statement is significant, for she was born and grew up in Baghdad and had only limited exposure to Kurdistan. Additionally, she added that her mother, a staunch supporter of a unified Iraq, would disagree with her.

Lela, however, would strongly disagree with Zhala. Having lived most of her life in Mosul, her family went to Iran in 1974, before the outbreak of war between Barzani’s faction and the Ba’ath. Her father was imprisoned for a short while in Iraq because he

was a Kurd and actively against the Ba`ath; they escaped shortly after his release. Despite her family’s negative experience, Lela feels that she has very strong ties to Iraq, misses it deeply, and could never imagine an independent Kurdistan, for she sees Iraq as a unified whole. Although these women were raised in different cities, they have various narrations of their conceptions of a future Kurdistan.

Nasaneen, who is originally from Sulaymania in Kurdistan, is the daughter of once-time active KDP parents. Her family was one of the first to come to Virginia in the 1980s and helped in establishing a strong network for the Kurdish community. Although she acknowledges that Kurdistan is part of Iraq, her parent’s strong political activism has made her a strong proponent of Kurdish independence. She self-identifies as Kurdish, for she has no link or reason to speak of herself as Iraqi.

Mariana, a Chaldean Christian from Mosul who had initially left Iraq to complete her Ph.D. in the Soviet Union, came back to join the Peshmerga’s struggle for independence. Interestingly, this non-Kurdish woman gradually became a firm believer and participant in the struggle, for she had grown up in El-Qosh, a village outside of Mosul with a Kurdish population. As a result, she was part of many family deliberations and discussions about the Kurdish situation. She considered herself to be Kurdish, witnessed the impact of the 1974 revolt on her Kurdish friends, and saw herself as a human rights’ activist. Mariana believed that although women were respected in Iraqi society, they were still exposed to human rights violations in Iraq, and that Kurdish women had it worse due
to their ethnicity and gender. Many women were involved in the Kurdish struggle;\textsuperscript{89} and although she was not Kurdish, Mariana eventually assumed a position of political leadership in the Kurdish independence movement. Her involvement in this movement led to her self-exile from Iraq, after which she did not talk with her family from the late 1980s until 2003 out of fear of being tracked down.

Initially, I was concerned that I would be misrepresenting the Kurdish community by labeling it as part of the Iraqi diaspora, even though they are part of the geography of Iraq and from the outside someone would identify them as Iraqi; to a certain extent, I still refrain from doing so. One reason for this is that the Kurdish diaspora is largely studied on its own terms and is set apart from the Iraqi diaspora.\textsuperscript{90} I realize, however, that there is a generational difference that must be taken into account. More specifically, Kurds who were raised during the 1990s have a completely different connection to Iraq after Iraqi Kurdistan obtained a certain level of autonomy in the early 90s; my sample group focused on individuals who were mostly raised during the 70s and 80s. Moreover, the differences that arise among the Kurdish interviewees, as seen above, are symbolic of the Iraqi diasporic community’s heterogeneity as a whole. In this context, diaspora becomes a contested space that permits discussions reflecting what is taking place on the ground in their homeland and offers correctives to faulty generalizations. The different modalities of referring to the Kurdish nation are evident in the Kurdish community’s own internal arguments – while some refrain from being linked to Iraq, others are very much

\textsuperscript{89} Al-Ali, \textit{Iraqi Women}, 125.

\textsuperscript{90} See for example the work of Dr. Amir Hassanpour who writes extensively on the Kurdish diaspora and experience.
connected to it. Therefore, it would be simplistic to differentiate between an Iraqi diaspora and a Kurdish diaspora in respect to my own interviewee sample.

Such a binary, an overwhelming generalization that automatically excludes Kurds who are strongly affiliated with Iraq, runs the risk of ignoring the historical, political, economic, and social factors that influence the interviewees. These diasporists tell their stories and are influenced by such modalities as class, education, ethnicity, level of religiosity, and political orientation. Furthermore, *locality* is extremely significant because it allows us to understand why certain individuals may feel included or excluded in a particular geographical setting. More specifically, Baghdad-raised Zhala felt excluded from Baghdadi life since she could not speak her native language outside her home and felt that the Kurds were the subject of every joke. When I asked Kochar what he felt about his cousin’s comments, he replied: “My cousin is internalizing this way too much. She had a wonderful upbringing and lots of good Arab friends. I don’t know what changed her. She is just listening to what everyone else is saying. If she didn’t move to Kurdistan, she would have never known the difference.”

Hadar rationalizes Zhala’s comments differently and is confused as she tries to make sense of this “general phenomenon”:

> Kurds who do not even speak Kurdish want Kurdistan. Or Kurds who were born and raised in Baghdad, they never even associated with Kurdistan or Kurds, they want a Kurdistan. What is it? What do they want? Is it the language, the culture? Okay … the language I understand, but the culture is very similar to Arab and Middle Eastern culture. If you ask them what makes you different, they won’t know how to answer. But they still want it. These are things they heard from their parents, or if not their parents, [then] on summer trips to the north. Maybe it’s because everyone else wants it. I am Kurdish, born and raised in Erbil, the

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91 Kochar [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 3 January 2008.
Meanwhile, Lela and Kazhan, who were raised in Mosul, have completely different lived experiences. They did not feel excluded by the Mislawi community, but by a government that, they agree, excluded anyone who was anti-Ba’ath.

These interviewees are fascinating as they present how identity is understood as a verb rather than as a noun. Identity is not something an individual possesses in their genetic makeup or encoded in their mind. The way in which identity is usually referred is as homogenous and that everyone must possess an identity, but this is not necessarily the case argue Brubaker and Cooper. Rather it is an action, something that a person does and enacts. It is the way an individual understands him or herself through their experiences and observing what people do and say in their everyday interactions.

According to Brubaker and Cooper, there is” a thick tangle of meanings that have accumulated around the term ‘identity.’” Rather, they use conceptual terms to refer to identity. They argue that the active term, “identification,” does not presuppose that such identifying (even by powerful agents, such as the state) will necessarily result in the internal sameness, the distinctiveness, the bounded group-ness that political entrepreneurs may seek to achieve. Identification - of oneself and of others -is intrinsic to social life; ‘identity’ in the strong sense is not.” They assert that individuals may be called upon to identify themselves in any different ways in any number of abundant various contexts.

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93 Referring to people who are from the city of Mosul.
94 Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond Identity,” 11.
95 Ibid., 14.
96 Ibid., 14.
For that reason, Mariana chooses to actively identify herself as a Kurd (even though she is not), amongst other identities, as the Kurdish struggle is one that she has made her own.

While I am interviewing individuals who were born in the modern nation-state of Iraq, I do not seek to present them with a static Iraqi identity. Rather than thinking of it as a national entity, I use *Iraqi* as a device to understand how one’s self-identification develops, changes, and is narrated in relation to an original place of birth and in an abundant amount of contexts. More specifically, whether or not Zhala or Hadar agree with one another on Kurdistan is of little relevance; however, the way they both utilize Iraq as a point of reference for their own narrations is. Their different locales and experiences produce different contexts that influence the way in which they self-identify. What makes both part of the Iraqi diaspora is that they both originate from the same geographic land, in whatever way they want to relate to it, and their diasporic conditions, self-narratives, and identities are shaped by this original starting point.

### 2.9 Defining Iraqi

According to Liisa Malkki, now more than ever people are inventing “homes and homelands in the absence of territorial, national bases- not in situ, but through memories of, and claims on, places that they can or will no longer corporeally inhabit.”

More specifically, a bounded territorial belonging to a country becomes less relevant in the process of identity-formation.

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To many of the individuals I spoke with being “Iraqi” transcended a connection with the modern geographical nation-state, Iraq, and was connected to the idea of Iraq. Rather their connection to Iraq was based much more in its glorious history and the traditions and customs that eventually culminated into “Iraqi culture.” Their pride in their nation and what defined them as Iraqis is their history, from Sumeria to the Abbasid Empire, their generous and patient qualities, their level of education and scholarship, their strength and perseverance through adversity, and their diversity and their unity, as Kenan and Rawa explained is evident through their culture and specifically their food.

Kenan and Rawa’s interview encapsulated all of these elements when I met with them in January. Kenan, a doctor, and Rawa, a lawyer, were both educated in Iraq and Great Britain, and have been in the United States for 21 years. When I walked into their home, I was immediately struck by a large statue of a Babylonian winged-bull in their home’s entrance, and a strong tea scent that came from a two-piece tea set, *quree il chai*, they purchased from Iraq in 2000. I am familiar with Iraqi tea-making as my own mother taught me its art a couple of years ago: the water is boiled in the larger bottom pot, and then poured on to the tea and specific Iraqi herbs in the smaller pot on the top. Rawa explained that the “magic of Iraqi tea lays in its mix of two different types of teas, one of them being Indian from the days of trade when the Basra port was a bustling trade center.” “In fact,” Rawa continued, “you will never be able to find tea like this anywhere in the world, Iraqi tea has the most distinct taste...and Iraqi food is very different because there is influence from the Indians, the Turks, the Persians, and the Arabs... so then you see we have all of these different types of food, dolma which is Turkish, Sebzi which is
Irani, *Pacha* which is I don’t even know, *Iraqi Beryani* which is very Indian and so on. Every part of Iraq has a dish that is different, but in the end it is all Iraqi.\(^98\)

In an intriguing article on Iraqi culinary culture, Sami Zubaida speaks about the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the Iraqi nation-state and ultimately the conception of Iraqi nationalist identity. Once the imperial nation-building project began the original *Maslawi and Baghdaadi* regional foods that were deterritorialized, reterritorialize back into “Iraqi food” that fits under the guise of Iraqi culinary tradition, heritage, and nationalism. Zubaida makes a claim that a country’s cuisine is part and parcel of not only its memory, but also its collective identity.\(^99\) Rawa does not make a distinction whether or not the food is associated with any particular Iraqi city. However she does say that all the food is Iraqi. Hence, she makes it part of the Iraqi national and collective identity, and uses it as a memory of the Iraq that she loves and remembers.

Kenan made an interesting point in reference to his wife’s food imagery:

> You see all of these different dishes that Rawa spoke about, regardless if they are from Mosul, Karbala, Baghdad or Basra, they are all Iraqi and they are the basis of the Iraqi culinary tradition. If we keep taking away one dish then our national cuisine will be boring and not diverse. This is how Iraqi society is too. We are one out of many as symbolized through our food- you cannot pick and chose who is Iraqi and who is not Iraqi, because then this starts to take away from the diversity of Iraqi fabric and society. I will eat a dish from Mosul if I am from Baghdad, my son will marry a woman from Basra if I am from Mosul, I will put up a picture of the beauty of Kurdistan in my home if I am from Karbala- this makes no differences, because in the end we are the same, we are all unified through our connection to Iraq.

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\(^98\) Rawa and Kenan [pseudo.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 26 January 2008.

Looking at Kenan and Rawa’s interview from a gendered perspective it is interesting to note the difference in what each of them emphasizes. Although Rawa uses food as a natural source of pride of any nation and specifically the delicacies of Iraqi cuisine, Kenan expands on this notion by politicizing food and making it a testament to the diversity of Iraqi society and the culmination of centuries of inter-mixing with various communities, implicitly making a statement about Iraq’s political borders. While acknowledging that being “Iraqi” is a modern form of identification since the state’s inception, many of my interview subjects use “Iraq” as a point of reference for a history and culture in which they believe their ancestors were from and helped in formulating.

Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical framework and major concepts on diaspora, memory, and identity that guide this thesis. It also presents the relationship between the past, present, and future and its role in the self-narratives, identity-formation, and memories of the interviewees. Specific attention is given to the sectarianism discourse and how it has come to shape the interviewees’ narratives.
Chapter 3: The Iraqi Diaspora, Memory, and Identity

Chapter Summary: This chapter introduces the main theoretical frameworks on diaspora, memory, and identity that guide this thesis. In addition, it explains what is meant by “Iraqi” and introduces the essential terms around which the thesis revolves, mainly: the “Real Iraq,” “diasporic narrativity,” “diasporic (dis)enchantment,” “past”, “present,” and “future.”

3.1 Theories on Diaspora

Until the early 1990s, most characterizations of diaspora emphasized its catastrophic origins and uncomfortable outcomes. In modern times, “diaspora” has been used to describe the forced dispersal of Jews and Armenians from their historic homelands, and with it the moral degradation implied by that dispersion. This word has now expanded to mean a spectrum of different groups: “Today ‘diaspora’ and, more specifically, ‘diaspora community’ seem increasingly to be used as metaphoric designations for several categories of people – expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities tout court.” Scholars have employed Walker Connor’s definition, “that segment of a people living outside the homeland,” in order to apply it to “Cubans and Mexicans in the United States, Pakistanis in Britain, Maghrebis in France, Turks in Germany, Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, Greek and Polish minorities, Palestinian Arabs, blacks in North America and the Caribbean,

100 Cohen, 507.
101 Ibid., 507.
102 Safran, 83.
Indians and Armenians in various countries, Corsicans in Marseilles, and even Flemish-speaking Belgians living in communal enclaves in Wallonia.\footnote{Safran, Diasporas in Modern Societies, 83.}

Safran, who seeks to limit this broad definition lest it lose all its meaning,\footnote{Safran, Diasporas in Modern Societies, 83.} suggests that it be applied only to expatriate minority communities that share the following characteristics: they or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific original “center;” they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland; they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society; they 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; they believe that they should collectively be committed to maintaining or restoring their original homeland’s safety and prosperity, and they continue to relate, either personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.\footnote{Ibid., 83-84.} Using this definition, Safran argues that the Maghrebi, Turkish, Palestinian, Cuban, Greek, Chinese, and Polish minority communities of the past can be spoken of as diasporic communities.\footnote{Ibid.}

Robin Cohen supplements this list by adding the development of a \textit{return movement} that gains collective approbation; a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness; a common history and belief in a common fate; a troubled relationship with host societies; a sense of empathy and
solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement; and the possibility of a distinctive, creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance of pluralism.\textsuperscript{108}

The interviewees I spoke with narrate contradictory sentiments. While the Iraqi diasporists I spoke with narrate a collective vision of Iraq, they do not necessarily see it as an eventual place of return for themselves or their descendants. Although Iraq is currently in critical need of development, especially by people who know the country and have a personal connection to it, there have been minimal efforts by my interviewees to restore it back to the prosperity that exists in their memories and narrations of their pasts. I explain this term through a notion I call diasporic (dis) enchantment

3.2 The Iraqi Diasporic Condition

I find it particularly useful to employ the term diasporic (dis)enchantment when discussing the Iraqi diasporists I interviewed, for (dis) reflects their two-pronged diasporic condition. This term serves two purposes: 1) it presents a new way of looking at a new and understudied diasporic community that is not set against particular standards that for example Safran and Cohen outline, and 2) it displays the reasoning behind the way in which the interviewees identify themselves. It is first important to note that the term I am introducing, diasporic (dis)enchantment, fundamentally differs from that of Max Weber’s dis/enchantment. In 1917, Weber discussed the “disenchantment of the world” as the loss of magical and spiritual explanations to “modern” processes of

\textsuperscript{108} Cohen, Diasporas and the Nation-State, 515.
rationalization, secularization and bureaucratization. Enchantment (such as that brought by religion) was associated with transcendent meaning and purpose, and wonder and surprise. These are the qualities that modernity, with its focus on natural laws, threatened to destroy. According to Weber, "the increasing rationalization and intellectualization ... means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted." Modernity therefore is a process of disenchantment because it is equated with rationality, which is synonymous with methodical, organized, systematic, and most of all predictable social life.

The way in which Weber uses the term dis/enchantment is fundamentally different from the way in which I use it to refer to my interviewees. While Weber uses the term to characterize the new modern era, I use it literally to portray the contradictory diasporic condition that the interview subjects are living in.

Moreover, nostalgia and/or melancholia are not reflective of the interviewees’ diasporic condition as they do not represent their contradictory state. Diasporic (dis) enchantment is indicative of an entire state where each process completes and is defined by the other. Being nostalgic for the past is one part of their larger contradictory condition that allows them to recreate their conception of Iraq – while disillusionment, anger, and sadness is the other part that disconnects them from Iraq in various ways. A

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majority of the interviewees are beyond being nostalgic as they are not so much longing for their pasts as much as proud of a history that provides a counter-narrative to today’s reality. To these interviewee’s their memories of Iraq still exist in their day-to-day lives and living rooms.

The interviewees’ discussions evoke an enchantment with the cultural traditions, customs, and homeland ties to Iraq that they create in their image of the “Real Iraq” that is created in their memories. As stated in the introduction, the “Real Iraq” they allude to is different for each person and is their idea and image of the place they used to reside in. This period of communal and neighborhood co-existence transcended sectarian and ethnic divides, but now has been replaced by sectarian and ethnic violence. This enchantment of the “Real Iraq” that they believe is represented through their pasts is recreated physically in their homes, as seen through Lamya’s depiction in the introduction, and psychologically through their sentiments and mannerisms. Even though they have been deterritorialized, their enchantment with their memories, pasts, cultures, and traditions reterritorializes them through a diasporic space characterized by their friendships, unity, bonds, political discussions, home decorations, Youtube clips of songs for Iraq, mannerisms, and social particularities. Some of the Kurdish interviewees do not ascribe to the memory of the “Real Iraq,” as will be discussed.

Despite their successes, one senses that Iraqis have chronic feelings of nostalgia and sadness. Kamil says: “My classmates, they tell me that I have a presence in the class, a
sad presence. The sadness Iraqis carry is not uncommon, and it is shared by all of us.\textsuperscript{112} More than the inconsistencies that arose between interviewees, the contradictions between their individual selves shed light on the Iraqi diasporic condition. This sadness and confusion serves as an explanation for their diasporic disenchantment as opposed to their diasporic enchantment. While they are enchanted by their pasts they are also simultaneously disenchanted by the present. The majority of the interviewees’ actions present a form of disenchantment in their lack of diasporic action and mobilization for Iraq. Although their diasporic condition is shaped by their cultural and psychological attachments to Iraq, their disillusionment with the current situation (viz., the war, occupation, humanitarian crisis, and especially the cycle of sectarian and ethnic violence) has overshadowed their enchantment with their pasts, leaving them disenchanted as well. The Iraq in their memories remains a “mythical home” but not one that they see being recreated in their life times and hence one that the can return to. As a result of their diasporic disenchantment, they create refuge identities that provide them a sense of stability. Many see themselves as establishing permanent residence in the United States, which, I suggest, may eventually make them an ethnic instead of a diasporic community. The statement that people used to make before, “We are not Saddam Hussein’s Iraq,” has now been transformed into “We are not the Iraq that you see on television now.”

\textsuperscript{112} Kamil [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 13 December 2007.
3.3 Definition of Diaspora

Considering that members of the Iraqi diasporic community I interviewed do not fit several of guidelines outlined above, I believe that the desire to construct a definition and conditions of a diaspora paradigm is problematic, for, as Carol Bardenstein says, “this runs the risk of being a classic de-historicizing move – reducing the fluid multivalent life of a word over time to privilege specific earlier usage.”\(^{113}\) In the twenty-first century, we are witnessing new types of mass population movements that are “set against major realignments in the world political order … new transnational configurations of power articulate with fundamental transformations in the political economy of late twentieth-century capitalism.”\(^{114}\) These recent migrations are creating new forms of displacement and, therefore, new types of diasporas. In the context of the dramatic increase in border crossing – whether these are labor/economic migrants, highly qualified specialists, entrepreneurs, students, refugees, asylum seekers, diplomats, travelers, or family members of previous migrants – the language of diaspora takes on new currency.\(^{115}\) Therefore, its meaning cannot be limited to the criteria listed by Safran and Cohen. The primary concern is that there have been only limited efforts to theorize these terms, for as James Clifford observes, “it is not easy to avoid the slippage between diaspora as a

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\(^{114}\) Brah, Cartographies of Diaspora, 179.

\(^{115}\) Ibid., 179.
theoretical concept, diasporic discourses, and distinct historical experiences of diaspora.”

Rather than placing the Iraqi diaspora along a particular criterion of diasporic conditions, I suggest that its condition sheds more light on this term’s ever-expanding and malleable nature. I also disagree with those scholars who wish to limit this term’s meaning. Instead of explaining why the interviewees’ self-narratives do not fit into one of the neat packages laid out by diaspora scholars, I use their proposed claims as starting points for rereading diaspora. In short, I am studying the Iraqi diaspora as one that constantly reformulates itself through historical events and discourses about who is and is not Iraqi and the future of the Iraqi nation and nation-state.

In fact, I theorize that existing characterizations endanger the future of diaspora studies and go against the changing global and transitional processes of our day. I therefore utilize features and questions laid out by Avtar Brah to distinguish “diaspora as a theoretical concept from the historical experiences of diaspora.” According to Brah, the image of a journey is inherent in the notion of diaspora, but this is a more permanent journey with an intention of settling. Among the questions that diaspora evokes are the following: When are the diasporists traveling? What is the historical period of time? What event(s) forced them to leave their homeland? How, and under what circumstances, did they travel? What were their socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions? Furthermore, the reasons for settlement are just as important as the reasons for departure.

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117 Brah, Cartographies, 179.
118 Ibid., 182.
Where did they stop along the way, and why did they decide to migrate once again? How did they come to settle in that particular country, and under what socio-economic circumstances? How did they insert themselves socially along race, religion, class, and gender lines? What processes did they go through once they reached “the land of residence”\(^\text{119}\)

All questions related to their departure and arrival are integral for the diasporic community’s future.\(^\text{120}\) The reasons why they left; the practices in which they take part; and the cultural, economic, and political specificities of each diasporic community make them different from the other groups.\(^\text{121}\) Each diasporic journey is lived and relived through “multiple modalities of gender, race, class, religion, language, and generation,”\(^\text{122}\) in addition to political orientation. Here it is important to distinguish among the diasporists and to avoid making any totalizing conclusions about the entire diaspora.\(^\text{123}\)

I use Brah’s concept of diaspora, as presented in *Cartographies of Diaspora*, as a basis for my research, namely, “diaspora as an interpretative frame referencing the economic, political and cultural dimensions of [these] contemporary forms of migrancy.”\(^\text{124}\) This refers to a list of new categories of migrants who are considered diasporists: “expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and

\(^\text{119}\) Ibid.  
\(^\text{120}\) Ibid.  
\(^\text{121}\) Ibid., 182-83.  
\(^\text{122}\) Ibid., 184.  
\(^\text{123}\) Ibid.  
\(^\text{124}\) Ibid., 186
Diaspora, I would argue, is an interpretative space in which to examine changing notions of one’s identity as a result of local and global political contexts and hegemonic discourses. In the case of diasporic Iraqis living in the United States, this space provides a diasporic refuge from the land of belonging that is in conflict with the safe land of residence.

Throughout this thesis I elaborate upon how our present understanding of diaspora will take on a new meaning(s) in several years as Iraqis’ self-narratives and imaginings shift. Diasporic narratives are those stories that different members of a diaspora narrate about their lived experiences, which acquire various imaginings and modalities based upon different historical moments and circumstances. How Iraqis refer to themselves as living in a diasporic condition is largely influenced by their modern history and the current political situation in which they are living. How they narrated their life stories spoke of a certain enchantment, as in a fascination and yearning for a homeland that they were deprived of by the Saddam government. However, their narratives changed dramatically when it came to the 2003 Iraq war and the sectarian violence, thereby signaling their disenchantment and reinterpretation of “home.” The irony in the case of Iraq is that the land of residence is the perpetrator of the 2003 Iraq war, which further complicates their diasporic narratives.

The concept of diaspora should not necessarily include a mythical return to the homeland, which is different from the desire to call a place “home.” The notion of mythical return is relevant as not all diasporas, among them the Iraqi, have a desire to

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125 Safran, Diasporas in Modern Societies, 83.
“return to the homeland.” Whereas before the 2003 Iraq war many Iraqis may have had some hope of returning, at least for visits, there is now a disconnect with Iraq. Their “home of belonging” now largely exists only as a fantasy, thus defining them as a diasporic community connected to the homeland through cultural and psychological attachment. I use the word “diaspora,” as it is referred to in postcolonial studies and cultural theory, as an emblem of “multi-locality and post-nationality,”126 as well as a device “to think about questions of belonging, continuity and community in the context of dispersal and transnational networks of connection.”127 Mutli-locality refers to the multiple sites of belonging for diasporic subjects, namely, the location of physical residence and of “belonging,” broadly speaking.128 In this sense, “diaspora” is largely post-national and even anti-national, as its subjects have various sites of connections that transcend national borders. In sum, I use “diaspora” as a site to track ‘new geographies of identity’129 across multiple terrains of belonging and self-narrative. Diasporic communities contribute to the understanding of the concept of identity in today’s world. As Paul Gilroy observes: “Diaspora as a concept [therefore], offers new possibilities for understanding identity, not as something inevitably determined by place or nationality,

127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
and for visualizing a future where new bases for social solidarity are offered and joined.”

3.4 Theories on Memory and Identity

_Diasporic (dis)enchantment_ is sustained by how the interviewees identify and speak of themselves. Enchanted with the past, their identities prove to be complex and multilayered, far from the simplistic picture of sectarian and ethnic identities that has been painted by the sectarianism discourse. Rather, their identities are a sum total of their life experiences, as Amin Malouf explains in his book _In the Name of Identity_. Their realization that they are still emotionally connected to their country of origin and, more specifically, their memories of that past (and idealized) Iraq entice them to retain this connection, as does the hope that the “Real Iraq” created in their minds will one day materialize. Meanwhile and more realistically, however, the diasporic experience has re-created their identities while a feeling of confusion over Iraq’s ultimate fate has forced them to create refuge identities.

Part of diasporic identity is grounded in the notion of identity-formation being in continuous production. More specifically, my discussion revolves around Stuart Hall’s definition and conception of cultural identity: “Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process,

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and always constituted within, not outside, representation."\textsuperscript{132} I look at identity as a production and a process that is continuously changing and reacting to both individual life experiences as well as larger external forces. I utilize Hall’s third framework, in which he refers to the post-modern subject, as presented in his work “The Question of Cultural Identity”:

…the post-modern subject, [is] conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a “moveable feast”: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround [us]. It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumed different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent “self.” Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different contradictions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or “narrative of the self” about ourselves.\textsuperscript{133}

Based on this framework, I label my interviewees as post-modern subjects who produce their identity based on a memorable past and a hopeful future. Hall says,

Cultural identity … is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being.” It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.\textsuperscript{134}

Throughout my research, the interviewees identified themselves with the present by setting it against the past that they hope to be recreated in the future. Their memories

\textsuperscript{134} Hall, Cultural Identity, 225.
form the core of their self-narratives and identifications, which are influenced by the present situation and myself as the interviewer. In his *On Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs posits that a significant relationship exists between the past and the present: “The past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present.” 135

Any discussion of the Iraqi diasporic identity must be grounded in understanding the past and the present in light of each other. The past being analyzed exists in the interviewees’ pre-diasporic state, whereas the present exists in their diasporic state. The past and the present have a direct relationship, for the present effects how the past is selectively read and remembered, and then used as a refuge for the Iraqi diasporists’ identity in order to reconcile the current violence and sectarian strife. Thus, identity-formation is grounded equally in the past and in the present. Due to this reality, the interviewees’ identities are informed by their memories, which are selectively chosen as a counter-narrative to today’s violent reality. According to Marita Sturken:

> Memory forms the fabric of human life, affecting everything from the ability to perform simple, everyday tasks to the recognition of the self. Memory establishes life’s continuity; it gives meaning to the present, as each moment is constituted by the past. As the means by which we remember who we are, memory provides the very core of identity. 136

No matter how cultural analysts and scholars define diaspora, memory is a fundamental element of understanding diasporic identity. 137 According to Marie-Aude Baronian, Stephan Besser, and Yolande Jansen, diasporic identities can be seen as having

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a triple sense of belonging: “to the other members of a distinctive local diasporic community, to diasporic groups in other locations around the world and lastly and most significantly for our purposes to the point of origin, the actual or imagined homeland that binds these groups together.”

These various dimensions have been debated as possible criterion for defining diaspora. Safran emphasizes a strict interpretation of the diaspora and homeland orientation and return, while Khachig Tololyan offers a broader-based conception of who may be considered part of a diasporic community. James Clifford focuses on the connections among diasporic groups, while Hall and Gilroy focus on the diasporic communities’ cultural dimensions and highlight their hybridity. Brubaker suggests that diaspora should be thought of as a category that “does not so much describe the world as seek to remake it.”

When one balances these factors, however, memory, “understood as a complex relation of personal experiences, the shared histories of communities and their modes of transmission,” emerges as the primary carrier of diasporic identity. Dina Abdelhady, who considers memory to be a significant element in shaping a diasporic community’s social life, states that almost all scholars in this field emphasize the importance of collective memory (especially that of the homeland) in defining the diasporic condition, as it enables the maintenance of a communal consciousness and solidarity. Their analyses also stress the importance of retelling the past in order to maintain solidarity while

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140 Baronian, Besser, and Jansen, eds. Diaspora and Memory, 11.
141 Abdelhady, Lebanese Diaspora, 39.
dispersed and their attachment to the homeland. Abdelhady adds that just as collective memory, “the selective process of describing the past,” is important to understanding the past, it is also significant in giving meaning to the present “because it indicates,” as Sturken observes, “[the] collective desires, needs, and self-definitions” of a diasporic community. Consequently, in Sturken’s analysis, memory portrays how a particular diasporic group wishes to be depicted by itself and by others. While constructing their collective memory, therefore, diasporic groups also construct their identities and future outlooks.

According to Mieke Bal,

cultural memory signifies that memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one ... cultural memorization [is] an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and re-described even as it continues to shape the future. Neither remnant, document, nor relic of the past nor floating in a present cut off from the past, cultural memory, for better or for worse, links the past to the present and future.

Iraqi diasporists are now at a critical juncture in their history, for they are formulating a new collective memory in response to the current situation, one that thrives on a past of real coexistence. They choose to memorialize communal bonds and images of mixed neighborhoods and hold on to any relic or event that symbolizes this coexistence, such as the 2007 Asia soccer cup. In the analytical realm of cultural memory, they are negotiating

142 Ibid., 40. I have italicized this for emphasis.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
their popular history in the public sphere and competing to make their narratives the formal collective memory.

In my discussion of memory, I therefore utilize the approach followed by John Collins in his discussion of Palestine’s Intifada Generation:

Unlike the concept of oral history, which often leaves one mired in unhelpful debates about the “accuracy” or “validity” of oral sources, the popular memory approach celebrates the profound explanatory value of personal narratives. “The guiding principle could be that all autobiographical memory is true; it is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, for which purpose,” writes Luisa Passerini (1989, 197). In popular memory research, then, what matters is the ways in which people produce the past through a dynamic engagement with the present (and even the future). This production involves a range of discourses, official and popular, dominant and oppositional, individual and collective.146

Similar to Collins’ popular memory approach, I also seek to include and hold as true the interviewees’ personal narratives as “creative, purposeful constructions that are always, in some sense, unique … [while also] taking seriously the deep structuring of these stories by complex historical forces, including forces that manifest themselves through powerful, hegemonic narratives associated with nationalist projects.”147

In The Collective Memory, Halbwachs shows that collective memory is not a given, but rather a socially constructed, notion: “While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember.”148 Being located in a specific group context, these individuals draw on that context to remember or recreate the past. As Lewis Coser explained in his introduction to Halbwach’s On Collective Memory, Halbwachs believes that “the past is a

147 Ibid., 23.
social construction mainly, if not wholly, shaped by the concerns of the present … the beliefs, interests, and aspirations of the present shape the various views of the past as they are manifested respectively in every historical epoch."\textsuperscript{149} The Iraqi diasporists’ competing narratives of their past are, therefore, a response to the sectarianism discourse and their aspirations for a future Iraq. Their individual self-narratives are contributing to the construction of a new form of collective memory both in the homeland and in the diaspora, a collective memory that is sustained through a similar narrative existing in the realms of cultural and popular memory.

\textbf{3.5 Understanding the Past and the Present in Iraqi Self-Narratives}

In order to fully understand and appreciate their self-narratives and identity-formation process, we must understand the social context that is producing these new identities and narratives. As such, the “past,” the “present,” and the “future” are defined as follows:

- **Past:** When they were living in the territorial boundaries of present-day Iraq.
- **Present:** The post-2003 American invasion/occupation and all that has happened since, with an emphasis on the sectarianism discourse.
- **Future:** The projection of their frozen past, which exists in their memories and dismisses the present.

We must ask ourselves what is taking place now that influences the interviewees to narrate their pasts, memories, and identities as they do. Similar to Abdelhady’s interviews of Lebanese diasporic artists, Iraqis participate in “the construction of a global sphere where ‘master discourses’ of their homeland and host societies are contested and reinterpreted.”\textsuperscript{150} More specifically, if we lay out what is taking place in light of the 2003

\textsuperscript{149} Halbwachs, \textit{On Collective Memory}, 25.
\textsuperscript{150} Abdelhady, \textit{Lebanese Diaspora}, 41.
Iraq war, we notice new elements that have the question of Iraqi identity and society at their core:

- The American-initiated sectarian discourse at the inception of the 2003 Iraq war and occupation
- The ensuing cycle of sectarian and ethnic violence since the 2003 Iraq war
- The removal of Saddam Hussein from power
- The new power configurations within the Iraqi government.

As cited above Visser says, “By 2007, a sectarian master narrative had emerged as the dominant framework for discussions of Iraqi politics.”\textsuperscript{151} He also states that the imposition of sectarianism can be seen through policy, the media, and by people who seek to make sense of Iraq’s complex reality.\textsuperscript{152} The rationale behind why foreigners highlight these sectarian differences does not have a solid explanation. Many of my interviewees asserted that it is an imperial maneuver, similar to the British strategy [of divide and conquer] to keep the country divided. Whatever the reason may be, my interviewees have internalized this “sectarian master narrative.”\textsuperscript{153} After analyzing my interviews, I concluded that this sectarianism discourse, more than any other element, has impacted Iraqi self-narratives, for Iraqis have internalized it into their identity-formation narratives and personal experiences.

However, there are other factors that impact Iraqis’ self-narratives, for the elements listed above are interlinked. Saddam’s removal created a power vacuum that has been largely filled by the United States and the largely organized Shi’a and Kurdish groups that had begun to form and organize during the final years of his regime, for they are in a

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 87, 88, and 91.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 83.
much easier position to assume control. To the interviewees, these sectarian-based political factions have been leading Iraq in the name of their own-self interests and are being sustained by a framework that encourages a sectarian-based government. Some have established militias that are, along with other groups, behind the current violence. According to Munir, one of my interviewees who claims to have sources within the government, some of these groups have attempted to maintain their control over their respective communities through television advertisements:

One of the most important contributors to the increase in violence is the big role that the media is playing in Iraq. There is no control of what is broadcasted on the television networks in Iraq. Now there are many groups who rule and who encourage the sectarianism idea in order to obtain power. Any of the groups who have money buys a channel and tries to sell his political agenda to their particular constituency. The extremists in the society listen to these television ads. Even those who are educated have this mentality of Sunni and Shi`a and Kurd – the war has emphasized it.\footnote{Munir [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 7 December 2007.}

In attempting to explain the violence, Munir identifies himself as opposing these factions and attempting to show the real face of Iraq, which exists in the past. The present is mired in these political factions, which he does not relate to in any way. Rather, he argues that they have gone to the extreme in order to brainwash people to think along lines that did not previously exist.

Here, I adopt Pnina Werbner’s notion of the diasporic global sphere as “the space in which different transnational political imaginaries are interpreted and argued over, where fables are formulated and political mobilization generated in response to global social
dramas.” Similar to Abdelhady’s conclusion about members of the Lebanese artist diaspora, participants in the Iraqi diasporic public sphere regard their engagement with the sectarianism discourse as an important source for their identity. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson established a significant role for print capitalism in the emergence of modern nationalism and national identity. According to this theory, books, novels, newspapers, and print media gave their readers the idea of a group of unseen readers who were simultaneously consuming and reading the same print in the same language. I take this a step further: American print media has created a new form of dialogue around Iraqi national identity among Iraqi diasporists. Their reading of newspapers and online articles, as well as listening to television and radio talk shows, have created a new discourse around what it means to be Iraqi. More specifically, the news is the primary source of where the interviewees have learned how their society is being referred to today. In more than one interview, one of my interview subjects would express that he is attempting to correct the faulty news coverage of Iraqi society by presenting who the “Real Iraqi” is.

Ironically, today’s news media has the ability to bring Iraqi diasporists together around a form of national identity or to encourage those who are more separatist in nature. When I asked the interviewees if they feel that their identity has been impacted in any way, they gave three dominant responses, all of which countered the sectarianism discourse: they felt more Iraqi, as they felt the need to defend their country against this

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divisive discourse; they felt just the same, for they would not let what is being said about Iraqi society affect them in any way; and they felt Iraqi and must defend their confessional identity, which is falsely being portrayed as wanting to divide Iraq. A group of Kurdish interviewees argued that they felt more Kurdish, for their voices were finally being heard and addressed and the current Iraqi president is Kurdish.

The sectarianism discourse has created a conversation about the meaning of Iraqi unity and has provoked extremely loud responses. While the Biden Resolution was being discussed in committee, an on-line petition was distributed to Iraqi diasporists around the world so that they could make their opinions known. It would be an exaggeration to label this as something “revolutionary.” But in a way it truly was, for freedom of speech, both inside and outside of Iraq, had long been an unaffordable luxury. Their overwhelmingly negative response to the resolution and to the overall idea that Iraqis are inherently divided revealed their opposition to any attempt to divide the country. I present examples of these statements below:

I want my country to be one part, just like the body. If any part is cut it will not function like the whole, so please don't divide our country!

What gives you the right to decide for the Iraqi people what form of government their country should be? My family consists of Sunna, Shi’a, and Kurds. How do you propose we split them?

You cannot divide a people who have coexisted for centuries and who, despite their differences, have become one.

Please save our country “IRAQ.”

157 These comments are all taken from www.gopetition.com/online/14794.html.
Many of the diasporists I interviewed have adopted a “critical voice”\textsuperscript{158} vis-à-vis the sectarian narrative to challenge what is being said about Iraqi society today; others agree with the sectarian narrative in order to achieve a particular political or personal agenda. Their personal narratives emphasize a pre-war, pre-Ba’ath Iraq that focuses on economic success, coexistence, and peace, rather than a war-torn state characterized by sectarian strife. Iraqis feel nostalgic for the “Real Iraq,” Mesopotamia, \textit{Bilad al-Rafidain},\textsuperscript{159} or any other term they choose to use. Contrary to the narrative that undermines an Iraqi nationalist identity and emphasizes sectarian or ethnic identities, this nostalgia looks to a past of coexistence and a rich heritage and then projects it onto a future that they hope will materialize. In other words, they challenge public attempts that define their identity by presenting personal narratives and experiences that celebrate their own conceptions of their identities and their memories of coexistence.

Such a narration represents “a politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as it once was, a kind of useless act, from that of remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present.”\textsuperscript{160} Remembering the time of coexistence is an oft-recurring theme in my interviewees’ narratives. By narrating their memories as such and remembering in the way that they do, they contest the dominant sectarianism discourse used to interpret Iraqi society.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Arabic for “land of the two rivers.”
\item bell hooks, \textit{Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics} (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 147. Her pen name is always lower-case.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Chapter 4 discusses how my interview subjects are in a state of diasporic enchantment through their creation of what they have come to call as the “Real Iraq.” The chapter relays the memories of my interviewees and how they create the image of the “Real Iraq” as an alternative to the image of Iraqi society that has been portrayed in the news media. The second part of the chapter discusses the interviewees’ analysis of the current sectarian violence and their reasoning for why it is taking place, which sustains their diasporic enchantment.
Chapter 4: Diasporic enchantment: The “Real Iraq”

Chapter Summary: This chapter describes the interviewees’ condition of diasporic enchantment and explores how they identify with their conception of Iraqi identity by creating the “Real Iraq” to counter the sectarianism discourse.

4.1 Growing up in Iraq

Rather than accepting the present, which consists of a social environment that revolves around war, occupation, and the sectarianism discourse, my interviewees have turned to their memories of an idealized past to find peace with themselves. According to Halbwachs, “memory depends on the social environment.” They discuss their past as being the symbol of their true Iraqi connection, thereby dismissing the present as a time of non-connection to or non-identification with the homeland. Through this past-based identification, they have created a form of collective voice about their pasts in which each of them celebrates the same positive memories and denounces the various governments that, in their opinion, have manipulated Iraqi society throughout its modern history since the creation of the Iraqi state in 1921.

Reading the present in light of the past is integral to understanding the interviewees’ self-narratives, for it displays the fragility of identity reformulations in light of current world events. Halbwachs observes:

> We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated. But precisely because these memories are repetitions, because they are successively engaged in very different systems of notions, at different periods of our lives, they have lost the form and the appearance they once had.

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161 Halbwachs, On Collective Memory, 37.
162 Ibid., 47.
The interviews traced the interviewees’ lives from their years in Iraq until today. Several of the interviews revealed that many interviewees were not sure of how to speak about their childhood-teen identities, for they had never really thought about such things. As children and teenagers growing up in Iraq, there was little conversation about what their identity was. To most of them, the answer was naturally “Iraqi,” as Iraq was the country in which they were born and attended school, and where their family lived. Some focused on their ethnicity, such as those who were pan-Arabists or Kurdish nationalists. Many times the interviewees compared Iraq to the United States, for Iraq is a mix of ethnic and religious communities and its people are raised to believe that they are Iraqi, just like Americans of different ancestries are raised to believe they are American. According to Salwan, to be Iraqi is not something that you are taught; rather, it is the country in which you are born and raised, as well as the community of which you became a part.163 Omar described this as something that is hereditary, not learned. He emphasized that he never grew up being taught that he was Sunni, but that he was Iraqi.164

Most of the interviewees do not remember any form of mutual hatred or angst and did not view themselves as a divided society. To them, such an “Iraq” is not the “Real Iraq.” Waleed said: “I never felt more Sunni [than anything else]. I was never in a position to. I never thought for a second whether I am Sunni or Shi‘i.”165 Interrupting Waleed and setting his cup of coffee down, Qais interjected:

163 Salwan [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, handwritten interview with entire family present, Virginia, 7 January 2008.
164 Omar [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 1 March 2008.
We never believed or even thought that Iraqis were divided in groups. I am Muslim and I went to a Jewish school, and I used to eat lunch with our Christian neighbors every Sunday when they came back from church. We all played in the playground together. My parents never told me who I can and cannot play with. These sectarian problems are new. If you ask any Iraqi, you will hear almost the same thing. It is a very strange phenomena. [I] never thought we would go through this. When we are together, we are proud of being Iraqi, always.166

Qais is similar to most of my interviewees who expressed the same sentiment.

For a majority of my interviewees, school was a place of learning how to draw the Iraqi map, learn about Iraq’s ancient history and achievements, and, eventually, modern Iraqi history and politics. They raised the Iraqi flag every morning, nationalist classes taught about wider notions, and theoretical readings explained nationalism. When the Ba`ath came to power in 1968, and even more so when Saddam seized power in 1978, the watania (nationalism) classes were taught by Ba`thi party members who taught Ba`thi ideology and loyalty to Saddam and the Ba`ath. As Sami said: “It did everything except bring us closer to our country and nation. It taught us to hate it. It taught us to be angry and frustrated with it. At home we would suffer studying for this class. And at school in front of the teacher we had to put on a fake face to show that we cared about what we were reading. But none of us cared.”167

Inside and outside of school, everyone was Iraqi; confessional identity was a private, never a public, issue. For the most part friendships, especially among the students, were not based on confessional groups. In fact, even asking about one’s confessional affiliation was considered rude and taboo. Upon coming home from school one afternoon, Sufyan asked his father about the difference between the Sunna and Shi`a. Sufyan told me that he

166 Qais [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 10 December 2007.
had never seen his father so upset with him for asking “such a rude”\textsuperscript{168} question. However, there were certainly instances when religious minorities did feel differences. For example, even though she could opt out, Mariana found it frustrating that a course on Islam, but not on Christianity, was offered. Furthermore Mu’taz, who is from a Shi’i family, was very surprised that although the majority of Iraqis are Shi’i, there was never a class that explained the difference between the two dominant sects.

4.2 Diasporic enchantment

The interviewees substantiate their fantasy of the “Real Iraq” through their processes of diasporic enchantment. As already discussed in the previous chapter, a majority of the interviewees have a particular idea of what it means when they label themselves as Iraqis. The characteristics outlined in Chapter 3 belong to the “Real Iraqi,” and they are therefore members of the “Real Iraq.” The way in which they refer to themselves as the “Real Iraqis” forms one part of their diasporic enchantment.

\textit{Diasporic enchantment} entails one’s fascination with their pasts and memories and active engagement with being an Iraqi in diaspora through speech, culture, mannerisms, and homeland consciousness on a day-to-day basis. In line with Clifford Geertz’s use of Gilbert Ryle’s notion, I present a brief “thick description”\textsuperscript{169} of how these diasporists are culturally enchanted. Although the way in which they are diasporically enchanted and practicing their culture may not differ from other diasporic communities, the “thick

\textsuperscript{168} Sufyan [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 7 January 2008.
"description" shows the significance of their symbolic actions by explaining the context of the practices and the discourse in which they are functioning.\(^{170}\)

Upon walking into all of the interviewees’ homes, I was automatically greeted with three kisses on the cheek from the women, a handshake from the men, or a kiss on the forehead from elder men who knew me and my family. All of these are Iraqi customs. Before each interview, I asked whether they would prefer to speak in Arabic or English. To some the answer was almost automatic – Arabic. Others said they would mix languages, depending upon what they felt comfortable saying in which language; another group found it offensive, as if I thought that their ability in English left something to be desired. I had a choice to interview them in the guest room, living room, or kitchen. Many of the houses had Iraqi objects such as carpets, dishes, plates, quilts, Iraqi tea and coffee pots, and art. These cultural representations were on display, sometimes in an “Iraqi” corner or, in the case of paintings or pictures, in different rooms. One woman’s toiletry set was of palm trees, which reminded her of her origins in southern Iraq. Shatha said: “In Iraq, we didn’t need to decorate our house with art from Iraq, because we lived in Iraq. It did not mean much for us. But here it is different. We want to recreate Iraq in our living rooms.”\(^{171}\) Her house is adorned with:

- A plate with a picture of Abdul Karim Qasem\(^{172}\) signed by him with his picture (sold after the war at the royal palace for $1)
- A plate made of rare bronze found only in Iraq. Saddam used this bronze to make plates that bore his image and the *thawr al-mujanah*.\(^{173}\) He saw himself as

\(^{170}\) Ibid., 10.

\(^{171}\) Shatha [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkairo, tape recording, Virginia, 8 January 2008.

\(^{172}\) Iraqi prime minister who seized power in the 1958 coup d’etat that overthrew the monarchy.

\(^{173}\) A winged bull that was considered to be a godly figure. Mostly seen on Assyrian buildings and monuments.
continuing the Iraqis’ ancient and magnificent history. “Babylon” and “Iraq” were inscribed on it (sold after the war for $22 at the royal palace)

- 2 Iraqi paintings from Baghdad
- A 200-year-old Mislawi wedding quilt hung up on her largest wall
- Muslim rosaries and golden plates with Qur’anic verses inscribed on them that she bought in Baghdad
- Iraqi jugs out of clay from the south
- Silver jewelry and carved work
- A mug bearing a picture of the Iraqi flag and King Faisal I.

Sumaya, an Iraqi artist who displays her artwork throughout her house, said that her own ceramic designs and artwork are influenced by Iraq’s history. Sumaya said: “I wish Iraq was still the same, the one I knew, so that I could continue to develop my artwork. Now it will just be more of the same of what I have been doing. My art and creativity have stopped, because the Iraq I knew has stopped. There really is not much more that inspires me there.”

In addition to home décor, certain cultural and traditions were repeated in each of the households that I entered. The woman of the household, whether she was being interviewed or not, would ask what I wanted to drink. For others, it was almost customary to serve me Iraqi chai [tea]—one that Iraqis like to boast has a distinctive and fine taste, as Rawa narrated above. When I questioned why different people served me different drinks, I found it interesting that the answer almost always revolved around how they perceived my own identity. Those who offered me tea knew me; others who did not would say: “You are Iraqi, [so] of course we will offer you tea first. What else would we offer you?” Those who asked my preference (but certainly not all of them) would say:

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“You are American. We are not sure if you want tea, or soda, or juice.”175 Drinks were usually served with a sweet, for some women chose to show off their Iraqi recipes by serving me what they claimed was “the ‘Real Iraqi’” klecha176 or baklawa. If I dared to leave it on my plate, I would automatically be told that I was missing out on a great Iraqi delicacy.

Mariana knew that my family is from Mosul. When I was making the interview appointment with her, she told me that she had been craving kibbet el-Mosul177 and would cook it for both of us the day of the interview. In fact, many conversations revolved around lunch and dinner tables, and most women were proud to show that even though they had been living in the United States for long periods of time, they could still cook their mothers’ and grandmothers’ dishes from the homeland. One time, after we had finished our meal, Rafil told me: “See, this is Iraqi culture, this is our hospitality. You should write this in your report. We are very, very generous people. In Iraq, our houses were always open to everyone and anyone to eat with us.”178 The comments these interviewees made about the importance of offering and sharing food, making special dishes, and showing hospitality are indicative of key performative moments in the presentation of Iraqi identity. Under the heading of commensality,179 Mary Douglas

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175 These were general statements that were made by several of the interviewees.
176 A well-known Iraqi pastry made with dates.
177 An Iraqi dish specific to Mosul. Continuing on what cited with Zubaida’s article above, after the creation of Iraq in 1921, food in the region all dissolved into having a national Iraqi food identity and is symbolic of the re-territorialization of culture, cuisine, and nations. Food is a symbolic boundary marker. Even though food was different in different cities- when the state was created, it was put under the idea of Iraqi food cuisine, not Maslawi or Baghdadi food.
argues that food preparation and consumption are social events that are rich in meaning and communication and are a medium of social relationships. Douglas says, “If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries.”

For those who knew my family, questions about their wellbeing arose; the remainder (which was also the majority) would inquire about my family background, place of birth, education, and why exactly I chose to engage in this study. “Intee min bait min, ” (“What family do you come from?”) they would ask. Once I finished explaining my family background, an automatic historical and family analysis would take place as individuals tried to connect me with people they knew and events in my family. Those who were unfamiliar with my Mislawi accent, which varies from the Baghdadi colloquial accent, would ask if I was Palestinian, Syrian, or Lebanese. The look of shock on their faces when I told them I was Iraqi was followed with questions about how they had not seen me at anyone’s house or at any of the Iraqi events or parties?

Although, I am part of the Iraqi diaspora community and am extremely active on Iraqi issues, I never plugged into the Iraqi social network and was thus unknown to most of my interviewees. This surprise is symbolic of the strength of a vibrant Iraqi diasporic community that retains a particular confidence in its vast network, friendships, and social

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181 Douglas, Deciphering a Meal, 249.
182 The accent spoken in Mosul differs from that of Baghdad. For example, “ch” is not used in Mosul although it is widely used throughout the rest of Iraq.
activities. There is an underlying assumption that if someone is of Iraqi background, he or she must be part of the larger Iraqi social community. Anderson’s notion of imagined communities is useful for this discussion as interviewees are creating their own imagined Iraq and Iraqi community in the diaspora. Out of the Iraqi state boundaries, they are creating other nations that are based on their ideas and symbols of what the Real Iraq is.

4.2.1 Political Discussions in the Diaspora

Lu’ay’s wife Maysoon quite accurately summarized the experiences that I had met with during each interview. Her husband’s interview was right before hers. Starting in his youth and until this present day, he has been a Ba’athi ideologist but an opponent of the Saddam regime, which, he claims, was as far away from the Ba’athi ideology as possible. Lu’ay narrated his political involvement over the past forty years and detailed his effort to provide an Iraqi alternative to overthrowing Saddam, rather than American involvement. “I was criticized as a Ba’thi, and that I only wanted Saddam to stay in power, and that was my intention … but that was far from the truth. The truth is those Iraqis who were helping them they were the Ba’ath who corrupted the real ideology and who worked alongside Saddam. They are the ones who have helped in the destruction of Iraq. And see where we are now?”

Eavesdropping on the conversation, when it came to her turn, Maysoon let out a great sigh and, with what seemed as a plea to vent, she explained:

This living room, and those before it in other houses, have been the sights of Iraqi history and politics replaying itself. The amounts of arguments, bashing,

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and fights that have taken place here cannot be counted. We didn’t have these discussions in Iraq because we were too scared. But here it is as if I am still living in Iraq, because the same exact issues that we lived there are being discussed here.184

Maysoon’s frustration is insightful for a gendered analysis of her husband’s interview. While she obtained a bachelors degree in political science and is deeply invested in the issue, her interest in Iraq lays in the culture and values that she has tried to maintain at home and teach her children, as well as the dinner parties, that hosted Iraqis, and were the source of these arguments. However, even though she is frustrated with the role Iraqi politics has had in her family’s life, she still remains knowledgeable of the issues. In fact, the interviewees’ level of knowledge, awareness, and understanding of Iraqi politics is impressive, even though they say that they no longer identify with post-2003 Iraq. Each interviewee inserted herself or himself in an interpretative retelling of the past by presenting a varied alternative history through their own independent reading of what is taking place in their homeland. Each living room that I entered revealed a different historical account of a community of individuals whose arrival and residence in the DC-Metropolitan area stem mainly from political reasons. Even if they were not escaping political repression, Iraq’s repressive political situation had a negative impact on the country’s economy.

Despite their particular difficulties with their pasts, Iraqi politics are very much integrated into how their lives are shaped here. The diasporic space of which they are a part of here serves as a medium for political conversations that could not have taken

place in Iraq. Although many Iraqis are still guarded in their conversations, it is still relatively more relaxed than it would have been in their homeland.

*Diasporic enchantment* is rooted in their recreation of the “Real Iraq” by how they live in the diaspora (explained above) and narrate their pasts and self-narratives. The next section focuses on the components that create the “Real Iraq,” all of which can be divided along lines of historical understanding, places of coexistence, values of coexistence, and the attributes of “Real Iraqis.” As Walter Benjamin has observed: “Memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater.”\(^{185}\) I do not construe how Iraqis speak of their society as the “way it was,” but rather as a stage upon which they perform the “Real Iraq” in response to what today presents.

**4.3 Creating the “Real Iraq”**

Halbwachs says:

> We shall better understand the nature of this reshaping operation as it applies to the past, and perhaps also to dreamlike states, if we do not forget that even at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu. In a way, contemplative memory or dreamlike memory helps us to escape society. It is one of the rare moments when we succeed in isolating ourselves completely, since our memories, especially the earliest ones, are indeed our memories: those who might read them in us as well as we read them ourselves have either vanished or been dispersed. Yet, if we flee in this way from the society of the people of today, this is in order to find ourselves among other human beings and in another human milieu, since our past is inhabited by the figures of those we used to know. In this sense, one can escape from a society only by opposing to it another society.\(^{186}\)

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\(^{186}\) Halbwachs, *Collective Memory*, 49.
As stated in chapter 3 most of the interviewees identified themselves with an imagined “Real Iraq” that exists in their memories (viz., in the past) and has no connection with Iraq today. Bardenstein refers to the phenomenon of “not-seeing” the present as “selective displacement or “not-seeing” of immediate present surroundings in favor of former surroundings.”\textsuperscript{187} She states that this is common in diasporic cultural production “and one that is also enabled by the process of blurring.”\textsuperscript{188} She cites the example of former Palestinian inhabitants who return to the sites of their destroyed villages, which are now covered with pine trees and forests planted by the Jewish National Fund. Even though the forests are visible, the villagers walk around as if not seeing them at all. They seem to literally see only the vegetation that was part of the village landscape when they lived there more than fifty years ago. Similarly, my interviewees are selectively “not-seeing” the sectarian violence by claiming that it does not represent the “Real Iraq.” For Laith, the “Real Iraq” can be summarized in one word — *generosity* — which he defines as the honesty, passion, love, and support that Iraqis give to one another.\textsuperscript{189}

Based on this past, they argue that everything taking place now is due to sectarian politics and various groups vying for power and their own agendas, manifesting in violent ways and among uneducated, poor criminals; however, it is not representative of the Iraqi people. Through their self-narratives, the interviewees described a dichotomy between “Real” and “Unreal” Iraqis. The first group consists of those people who exist in their fantasies of the “Real Iraq” while the second group consists of those who are living in

\textsuperscript{187} Bardenstein, “Figures of Diasporic Cultural Production,” 29. Italicized in the original.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{189} Laith [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 5 February 2008.
Iraq now. They argue that external forces are infiltrating into the country and creating this havoc. Those who are responsible for the current state of affairs are not Iraqis, or at least not “the ‘Real Iraqis’ who they know, those Iraqis who exist in the “Real Iraq.” They see themselves as the representatives of the “Real Iraqis” who are now living in the United States. This is an extremely ironic explanation, for Iraqi diasporists are both defining what they believe their identity to be as well as defining the identity of those Iraqis still living in the country. This is quite significant, for it displays the role of diasporic communities in reshaping the image of the national imaginary.

It is significant to note that the interviewees’ socio-economic status and educational background have a minimal role in the way they create the dichotomy between Real vs. Unreal Iraqis. More specifically, they believe that as there has been a brain drain in the country, Iraq has been left to the uneducated and lower classes that have been encouraging the violence today, rather than helping. However, for the most part their reference to the unreal Iraqis is not class based but merely an overwhelming generalization of everyone who is in Iraq who allowed it to reach this state- it is these people they feel they cannot identify with. However, even some of those Iraqis who live here, those who are more divisive and sectarian, are not seen as “Real Iraqis.” Sufyan said:

> Sometimes I feel very close to Iraq. When I go to some events and there are wrong facts about my country, it makes me feel that I am not Iraqi. I do not feel Iraqi. I am not one of them. I am not the Iraq that is shown now. There are wrong facts about Iraq. This is not the “Real Iraq.” The “Real Iraq” is intelligence, 6,000 years of civilization, first built minarets, the medical system, the books, the history – that is the “Real Iraq.” I don’t even know what that place is now.¹⁹⁰

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¹⁹⁰ Sufyan [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 7 January 2008.
The “Real Iraq” and the “Real Iraqis” revolve around a shared reading of the past that they individually expressed when I asked them what the “Real Iraq” means to them. While endless policy analyses and media reports assert the inherent divisions in Iraqi society, the Iraqis I spoke with told a different story. In order to present the most unbiased account, I simply asked them: “What are your memories of Iraq, the good and the bad?” The underlying theme seemed to be that there was a culture of coexistence and this happened in a number of ways, as will be discussed below.

Certainly, these interviewees are selectively engaging the narratives that they wish to portray about themselves. However, it is significant that a majority of their narratives revolved around memories of coexistence as a way to counter the portrayal of their society that is broadcast around the world. It would be interesting to speak to them after ten or twenty years and see how they would retell their memories at that point.

Today, they are using what I call “savior memory” to rationalize the current situation and to save themselves from the embarrassment of its sectarian strife and violence. But this type of memory is highly politicized, since it is a response to a political context. In other words, the current political climate is injecting itself into the present reading of the past. Various groups and individuals use savior memory to provide a statement opposed to the political discourse. Furthermore, some of my Kurdish interviewees used it to sustain their Kurdish nationalist dream, as did some of the Shi’a who believe that they are entitled to more representation in the government. In other words, it is based in their reading and understanding of Iraqi history and how they were represented in the past. The
concept of savior memory is closely connected to bell hook’s conception of the politicization of memory to transform the present. The way they narrate their memories represents "the politicization of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as once it was, a kind of useless act, from that of remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present."\textsuperscript{191} Their memories do not seek to fantasize the past, but actively attempt to correct a hegemonic discourse that has grave consequences for the future. Thus, they are using their memories in an attempt to save Iraq from being completely fragmented and from being an Iraq that they do not know or identify with.

Savior memory is just as much a form of remembering the past as it is a way of re-narrating history for one’s own political or personal purpose. Politically, it can be used to justify a particular agenda; personally it can be used to fathom and understand painful situations, such as the current cycle of violence.

I would like to qualify the point I made above. The demographics of my sample group are significant to this discussion. My group of interviewees form a diasporic elite and are members of the upper middle classes in Iraq. This has a large impact upon their responses, for their exposure and involvement while growing up in Iraqi society differed quite a bit from those who may have lived in more humble or unmixed settings. The elements that tied them together were their level of education, social class, and level of religiosity. `Alya said: “I have a lot more in common with a well-to-do and educated Sunni woman than a humble Shiʿi woman who lived in the Sadr city and not in

\textsuperscript{191} hooks, \textit{Yearning}, 147.
Mansur.” While such accounts are representative of the self-narratives of the diasporic elite, they could very well be quite different for those coming from other backgrounds. Even though Mosul and Baghdad have different societal make-ups, the family background of a middle-class Mislawi and Baghdadi have more in common than that of someone from the same background but a different class. Furthermore, Kurds raised in Mosul or Baghdad high society differ greatly from those who felt that they were repressed by the government, such as the example of Kochar and Zhala who are cousins but whose immediate families come from different classes.

4.3.1 Before and After the Creation of the Nation-State

To most of my interviewees, the “Real Iraq” existed before the modern-day borders created by the British in the early 1920s. Visser explains that there are two broad approaches to the question of territoriality in the literature dealing with Iraq as a modern state. According to the classical national approach, Iraq is a timeless concept that has significance throughout human history, as seen in the introduction to Britain and Iraq: A Study in Foreign Affairs, which Visser cites:

Mesopotamia is the name the Greeks used for the Land of the Two Rivers, but the inhabitants of the land have always called it Iraq. As old as history itself, there was a flourishing civilized city on the Euphrates called “Uruk.” In line with the Semitic custom of calling the whole by the name of its parts, the whole land came to be known as Iraq … During the latter part of the Ottoman period Iraq came to be constituted of three major wilayet [governorates] Baghdad, Mousil and Basrah.

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192 Alya [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 25 December 2007. In its prime, Mansur was one of Baghdad’s more affluent and well-known areas.
Even though most Iraqis I spoke with subscribe to this line of thinking, there are still those modern-day Western historians who consider Iraq as no more than a British creation that emerged after World War I with a British, rather than an indigenous and historical, grounding.\textsuperscript{194}

Iraq was a consequence of what may be termed a series of logical accidents. Basra was required for prestige and the defence of India; Baghdad for prestige and the defence of Basra; and Mosul for prestige, the defence of Baghdad, and the viability of the whole.\textsuperscript{195}

According to Hala Fattah and Dina Khoury, this interpretation, which is popularly used in today’s discourse and many histories written about Iraq, is accompanied by a disregard for – and even annihilation of – Iraq as a historical concept or as possessing any form of pre-nation-state existence or continuity. This is problematic, for the state has become confused with the nation.\textsuperscript{196} When the issue of Iraq arises, Western and Arab analysts immediately begin to discuss the modern state. They argue that for the national project to have legitimacy, ethnic and religious diversity must subscribe to a unitary ideology and nationalism based on loyalty to the state and to a distinct territory supported by a viable economy.\textsuperscript{197} Iraq is seen as challenging this notion, for the argument asserts that its inhabitants are composed of “fissiparous” communities that prefer their confessional ties over their national identity.\textsuperscript{198} Consequently, from the outset the Iraqi

\textsuperscript{194} Visser, \textit{Basra}, 7. \\
\textsuperscript{196} Hala Fattah and Dina R. Khoury, “The Debate on the Iraqi Nation: Artificial Construct or Work in Progress” (paper presented at the Sixth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, Florence, 10 May 2004), 2. \\
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 3. \\
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
nation is considered non-existent. However, “to be a nation, a polity does not need to subscribe universally to a unitary nationalism. The presence of strong (sub-national) communal or confessional identities does not preclude a simultaneous national identity, though that identity may be defined differently by different sub-national groups.”

The older interviewees felt a sense of responsibility to narrate their interpretations of Iraq’s history. For the most part, their retelling revolved around counter-narratives to what I call the “unique artificiality syndrome of Iraq” alluded to above. According to this narrative, Iraq has always been plagued with this disease and is now, once again, infected with it. Khoury and Fattah cite four standard arguments of this narrative: (1) there was no Iraqi nation until an external force (the British) fabricated the state, which then created the nation; (2) Sunna, Shi’a, and Kurds are definable categories that stand in the way of an organic nation by virtue of their separatist traditions and exclusionary stances; (3) the only factor that bound Iraqi society together for the past several decades was Saddam’s iron fist. According to Fattah and Khoury: “Today there is no question in the mind of neoconservatives and Western and Arab theoreticians that if it had not been for the strong Iraqi authoritarian state over the past thirty-five years in Iraqi history, the various communal groups would have been at each other’s throats” and (4) since there is no societal cohesion, Iraqi national sentiment and identity barely exist, if at all.

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199 Ibid.
200 Personal correspondence with Chris Toensing, December 2007.
201 If these arguments are true, then one could ask what bound Iraqis together before Saddam, when the Iraqi monarchy and his post-monarchical predecessors ruled.
202 Fattah and Khoury, Iraqi Nation, 1.
203 Ibid.
Born in Baghdad in 1929, Yahya relocated to Jordan after the 2003 Iraq war. He had spent his entire life in Iraq, and worked as a lawyer. His wife was a schoolteacher, and the family enjoyed a comfortable middle-class income, according to Yahya. He considers himself a very liberal Muslim, in that he believes in and practices his religion regularly but still enjoys an occasional glass of wine. While going to his daughter’s house to interview her, he told me that he would also like to speak with me about Iraqi identity. Yahya certainly made my task easier, for he both asked and answered the questions: “Why is this taking place? What is happening to Iraqis? Why do people insist on our divisions?”

He continued,

Before 7,000 years, Babyloni...s, Umayyads ... all these civilizations were in Iraq. Iraq was always a place of transit ... from the Central Asian Tartars and Moghuls ... from the invasions of the West and Alexander the Great, the Macedonians, the Islamic Empire, the British ... I can keep going on and on ... so for that reason, it is not an isolated state, and the people who came over the centuries mixed with the indigenous Iraqis ... this remains as a contestation to those who say that Iraqis do not have a identity ... all these different groups they integrated, so it stayed as the basis for qawmiyyah. The Iraqi identity is there, and the different groups in it [are] integrated. Iraqis have so many different types. There are people who are black, just like Africans. This is a symbol that it can integrate any foreigner. And because it is balad khair, people from Iran to Lebanon always came to work in Iraq. If you saw the people who were working, 90% of them were from Iran ... all these Irani tribes came and became Iraqi, and they were given Iraqi citizenship. All the Fayli Kurds, they are all Shi’a from Iran. In Iraq there is no separation between the Sunni and the Shi’a since hukm al-watany, when Iraq was established in 1921 as a state and Faysal I became a king.

Yahya presents a quick but exhaustive narration of Iraq’s ancient history. Throughout his historical retelling, he continuously referred to Iraq. When I stopped him and inquired

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204 Yahya [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 23 December 2007.
205 Arabic for “nationality.”
206 Arabic for “a country/land of prosperity.”
207 Arabic for “the national government.”
about this use of “Iraq” to refer to ancient periods and projecting modern identities far back in time, he replied that, “the word Iraq is, in fact, derived from the ancient Sumerian city of Uruk, and has always existed.”\textsuperscript{209} In essence, this is what Edward Casey would call “pre-memory,”\textsuperscript{210} the commemoration of ancient history thousands of years ago, although it is impossible that the individual in question ever lived it. In what Casey defines as a form of remembering, Yahya, along with many of his fellow Iraqi diasporists, have commemorated ancient Iraq in their collective memories and narrations as a source of pride, even though they have never seen it. It is a country that has endured centuries of transformation, empires, violence, fighting, and collapse, but has always been resurrected.

Along with the other dynamics discussed below, the shock of what is taking place in Iraq today is, according to many of my interviewees, something that they have never read about or seen in either ancient or modern Iraqi history. Rather, they say that Iraqis celebrate a history of diversity based on the facts that people from different regions have always met in Iraq and integrated into its social fabric.

4.3.1.1 The Monarchical Period

For some, especially for those whose families supported the monarchy, the monarchical period served as a time of unity for all Iraqis. For others, such as Rafid, such people were seen as government stooges. Yet as time went on and he compared what eventually happened on Iraq’s modern political stage, even he now yearns for that time:

\textsuperscript{209} Ibid.
It was a time of unity and peace, [for there were] very few people who were anti-government. Those were mostly the Communists, and they were seen as a very large threat. But even for those people who were anti-government, they were not treated badly and there were no road blocks or bombings or any of what we see now after the 2003 Iraq war and occupation. It was a time where we can travel from north to south. It really was one country. We can work in different cities, we can choose whatever business we wanted to work in. This all eroded during and after Saddam’s time.212

Although they realize that it is impossible to bring back the monarchy, they seek for the unity and time of peace it represented for Iraq’s future. Essentially, unity is the primary ingredient of the “Real Iraq.” Furthermore, many of the interviewees argued that Iraq’s demise began in 1958, after the overthrow of the monarchy. Political leaders at that point were thinking of themselves, more than of Iraq’s future.

4.3.2 Neighborhoods, Streets, and Community

Today, the internally displaced person’s (IDP) crisis in Iraq is based on sectarian violence. Many of the neighborhoods have been transformed from largely mixed neighborhoods into ethnic- or religious-based neighborhoods. This situation has been extremely frustrating for neighbors and friends who have been living side-by-side for decades, as well as an unfathomable scenario for those who are observing what is taking place in their once-mixed neighborhoods. Layla, a 34-year-old woman from Baghdad, recently came to the United States and obtained a job at the Iraqi Embassy. Bewildered by the events, she related her neighborhood’s situation:

My mom is Sunni and my father is Shi’a from Najaf … so you can see this Sunni-Shi’a problem makes no sense — and it is a problem from external neighbors [countries]. The most devastating thing is how it has come to affect our neighborhoods … [Once] my friend wanted to take me home from work. My

211 This was also not the case under the Ba`ath government.
212 Rafid [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 12 December 2007.
neighborhood was mixed, but it was mostly Sunni families … there were incidents of crime in my neighborhood before, so because he is Shi’a we were scared that something may happen to him … So he started to drop me off before the entrance of my neighborhood so that he is not targeted – for two reasons: first, religion, and second because he is a man and I am a woman and we are unmarried. We do not know what offends these religious extremists. There is a lot of ethnic separation in Iraq now … people are even changing their last names.⁴¹³

However, contradictory to today’s situation, many of my interviewees describe neighborhoods and cities as sites of coexistence. This short section will not only present narratives of coexistence, but will also recreate the cities and sites that are now represented in a completely different fashion on the news. A majority of the interviewees described the diversity of their neighborhoods.

Zahid celebrated and was proud of being from Mosul, due to its close-knit community. He called it a “city of harmony where there is a Christian community which preceded the Muslim community. They are modern, decent, honest, and at peace with the Muslim community. We had good relations with the Christians. There were no ill-feelings. There was a little bit of separation, but overall we were all friends. I still have a recollection of the Jewish community and the Jewish quarter, what we called hay al-Yahud. But there were Jewish students in school. They were excellent business people and honest.”⁴¹⁴ However, the issue of Palestine was very difficult for people to deal with. According to Zahid, “the Jews of Mosul didn’t want to leave, the Zionists tricked them,
to force them out. But the Iraqi Jews didn’t want to leave … eventually the Zionists didn’t allow them to feel at home.”

In addition, Zahid further opined that although Mosul’s Christians and Jews had their own quarters, there was a level of healthy integration that among the three religious communities as well as between the Arabs and Kurds. He says that Kurds and Arabs did not have a problem, for all shared a very strong Mislawi culture. In fact some Kurds, because of the strong pan-Arabism movement, even saw themselves as Arab first. However, for the most part, the majority saw themselves as Iraqis and nothing but Iraqis.

Waleed added that there was a Baha’i contingent as well, but that “people in Mosul didn’t think that they were not Iraqi. We were all Mislawi within the mosaic of Iraq. We were all homogenous despite the differences.”

Ali continued that Mosul was special, for it held various unique communities (e.g., the Yazidis, who are ethnically Kurdish, and the Shabak) who could not be found anywhere else in the world. (These groups, however, have been targeted since the 2003 Iraq war and can now be found in Syria, Turkey, and perhaps other countries.) According to him, there was interaction with the Yazidis. As mentioned before, Zahid is half Kurdish; hence his narrative of integrating with the Yazidis is probably connected to this element. Although he said that he grew up identifying as Arab and had little connection with being Kurdish, his family connection may have impacted his view. According to the Yazidi family I spoke with, however, there was minimal interaction with the other

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215 Ibid.
communities. This was not so much due to communal hatred as it was to specific Yazidi cultural norms designed to maintain an intact community.\textsuperscript{217}

Bilal, whose family is originally from Baghdad (a significant and historic Shi’a city with a mainly Shi’a population) in 1936 and moved to Baghdad when he was seventeen years old. When I went to his daughter’s home for the interview, he asked whether I would mind if we drove and spoke, as he had to pick up his granddaughter from a prestigious private school in the area. As I did during every interview, I asked about his memories in the beginning. At that time, his cell phone rang and he said to his friend in an Iraqi dialect: “I am about to tell this young Iraqi girl researcher my memories of Iraq. We will talk later … yes, yes, I will tell her. Don’t worry.” Looking at me, he said: “That was one of my best friends. I knew him ever since I was a child in Iraq when I grew up in Karbala. He wanted me to tell you something very important.”\textsuperscript{218} Similar to the other interviewees who agreed with him, he wanted to tell me that the sectarian discourse is a new phenomenon that boggles all Iraqis’ minds:

My father was a very religious man, even though I am not. He was a Sunni preacher in one of the most famous Shi’a towns, Karbala. Even though it was a Shi’a city, we never felt that there were any differences. There was love and respect, and there was nothing related to this sectarian violence that you see on the news today. There it was a mostly Muslim town, and we all felt that we are only Muslims. We were friends from school, and I still have these friends like you just heard on the phone. Before the monarchy was overthrown we never had these types of problems. The successive rulers wanted to use sectarianism, but we never felt that there were any differences. My father was loved by the Shi’a in Karbala, and he remained respected when he moved to Baghdad.\textsuperscript{219}

\textsuperscript{217} The one Yazidi woman I spoke with said that Christians and Muslims would visit them many times and were so inspired by their religion and way of life that they would ask about the conversion procedure. No such procedure exists, however, for one can only be born into it. If a Yazidi marries a non-Yazidi, he/she is cast out of the community.

\textsuperscript{218} Bilal [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 16 January 2008.

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid.
Bilal concluded his interview by explaining how Iraqis are a pack of wolves; only by traveling together in packs will they be the strongest. He believes that throughout his childhood he has traveled in packs of diverse Iraqi groups, and it is what shaped him to be the successful man that he sees himself as.

Mariana’s small apartment was surrounded by Iraqi relics and pictures of her family and awards she had received for working on Iraqi human rights while living in the diaspora. Tears ran down her cheeks as she spoke about her time in El-Qosh, a small village on Mosul’s outskirts. She spoke to me about her parents and her siblings, the close-knit family they had and the activities in which they used to take part. When she entered college, her male and female friends would come to her family home on the weekends to spend the night and meet her father, who, she said, had a deep connection and interest in his children’s – especially his daughters’ – lives. During Ramadan, Eid, and Christmas there were joint dinner parties with their Christian and Muslim neighbors, and her friends from Mosul would make special trips to El-Qosh to spend Christmas Eve with her family.

Leena’s family is from Hila, which, she says, was a very nice city because the Euphrates River cut through it. Many of the well-known families in her mixed Sunni-Shi’a neighborhood knew each other. She said: “I really do not even know what their sects are – and there were also Christian and Jewish communities there. Anyway, no one asked these questions. There is a small village. They call it Kifil. One of the Jewish prophets is buried there … when I was young no one talked about Jews during my
childhood, because of *adab*. People were usually very liberal. I met a Jewish girl in college … it was so nice during the time of college, it was so mixed."

Shatha’s family, also from Mosul, was upper middle-class and Christian. Her father was Catholic and her mother, from Lebanon, was Greek Orthodox. Growing up, their house was a venue for religious and political leaders to gather and socialize. Their parents never raised them to have a Christian identity; rather, her father was a nationalist who wanted his children to consider themselves Iraqi. Early in her life, Shatha fell in love with a Muslim and converted to Islam so that she could marry him. Even though her parents initially resisted it on the grounds that it was socially and religiously unacceptable for a Christian woman to marry a Muslim man, they eventually accepted it. In fact, considering what a staunch nationalist her father was, her family and brother were confused as to why he initially objected.

Even though they used to visit Lebanon every summer, regardless of where she was, she always considered herself Iraqi. Shatha’s mother and father were both educated, her father was a lawyer and her mother an AUB (American University of Beirut) graduate, while her aunts and uncles were mostly educated in England, to which Shatha attributes her British accent. Her family did not support the monarchy. According to her, during this time, there was an unspoken sentiment that Christian Iraqis were pro-colonialism due to the Christian British presence. However, Shatha’s father was a nationalist and anti-colonialism:

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220 Arabic for “manners.”
221 Leena [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 26 December 2007.
He had worked hard to be a parliamentarian. However, Nuri al-Said\textsuperscript{222} restricted him from being one on the grounds that he was a Christian, although there were other Christian parliamentarians. He [al-Said] knew how well-liked my father was … [and] was scared that he [my father] would climb the ranks and take over his position. My father was the first Christian to lead a demonstration against the British from a mosque … this was the societal setup … We were taught that we were just like other people. We grew up in a house that didn’t know the difference between religions. My mom exposed us to different religious texts as part of our family education. Our family friends were a lot like us. Most of them married Syrians or Lebanese, Christians or Muslims, it didn’t make a difference.

There were traditions that were specific to every community. You had to respect them because you had to deal with people, because the traditions are inherited as part of a collective society. Most women, regardless of their background, wore the \textit{abaya} or \textit{kasheeya} as tradition in Mosul. Our neighborhood was in Makawi. It was one alley, and there was my grandpa’s house, my cousin’s house, and the rest of the houses were all Muslims. All the women sat outside and all the kids played together. We would get \textit{Eidaniya}\textsuperscript{223} from our Muslim neighbors.\textsuperscript{224}

Salwan described the streets of Al-Nassiriya:

In my city, there was Sunna, Christians and I think we were mostly Shi’a – no one talked about this though. We were all together, and we would clean the streets together. We celebrated Eid with them, we celebrated \textit{Eid al-Fitr} and \textit{Eid al-Adha} with them. And \textit{Eid al-Sana al-Shamsiya}.\textsuperscript{225} We used to cook food together and go to the park and we all shared everything. We made \textit{timen},\textsuperscript{226} and the vegetables and the special sweets. The Kurds jump over the fire and wear their bright colors. And we used to make a tray of henna with flowers and before Eid. We get chickpeas and plant them in the garden, and they grow for Eid day. And we go put it in the river next to the park and we light candles and they flow in the river. The Christian women in my street wore the \textit{abaya}, and we would go to the holy cities together. The whole street would go on the bus, and the Christian families used to come with us to the holy places.\textsuperscript{227}

Salwan’s husband Hasan pointed out a contrast between neighborhoods in Iraq and the United States:

\textsuperscript{222}Nuri al-Said was a key Iraqi politician during the British mandate and Iraq’s monarchical period. He served fourteen terms as prime minister.
\textsuperscript{223}A gift of money children receive from their elders.
\textsuperscript{224}Shatha [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 14 December 2007.
\textsuperscript{225}These three Eids, festivities, celebrate the end of Ramadan and Hajj, and the Persian New Year respectively.
\textsuperscript{226}Iraqi Arabic for “rice.”
\textsuperscript{227}Salwan [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, handwritten interview with entire family present, Virginia, 7 January 2008.
In Iraq, neighbors were like one family. It is very different in the United States. Here we live for five years and we do not know anything about our neighbors. There I just used to enter their houses, all the neighbors’ houses. It was a lot more friendly.228

It is these neighborhood bonds that resonate so strongly in their memories and that they attempt to recreate in the diaspora. It seems as though the absence of neighborhoods ties is one of the hardest components of becoming adapted to the diaspora. Laith, who left Iraq in 1990 to study in the United Kingdom, described his feelings:

I may find everything I need here. I may get whatever I want, at least the basic comfortable living style, but at the end of the day I think about my life in Iraq. I am from Hadeetha. There is a relationship between every person there, and everyone is connected to one another. There is a close link. My grandfather was the sheikh of the asheera; he is still the sheikh now. Many people used to come and visit me in Iraq. Many families get together and get connected. There is a strong bond between each other. The elderly people would love it when we chat with them. We never find that here. Whenever I feel depressed I do have friends to speak with. But it is not the same thing as in Iraq, where my family, friends and relatives are. And then the food we used to eat – the gemar, kahi, dolma, mazgoof near the river, pacha, kubba – I love kubba – marag, fasoolya, tabsee, bamya, nomee heloo, gus, halaweeyiat229 ... no one can make that for me here.230

Many of the interviewees, who had been well-to-do in Iraq, have maintained their former financial and social status here in the United States. They talked about differences in Iraq between upper-class and lower-class neighborhoods and how sectarian and/or other identities may play out differently in homogenous communities. For example, Amir’s family lived in Hay al-Kafa`at, a neighborhood composed mainly of people who had studied abroad on government scholarships and returned to Iraq to serve their country. These families were from an upper middle-class elite and lived secluded from

228 Hasan [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, handwritten interview with entire family present, Virginia, 7 January 2008.
229 These are the most popular Iraqi dishes.
others. As a result of their socio-economic class, their lifestyle varied tremendously, and many of them were secular or moderately religious. They were mixed neighborhoods with a lot of social activity and inter-mixing between young men and women. Their common identity was based on their social class, level of education, and exposure to the outside world.

Amir said that the more working-class neighborhoods were like shanty towns, more homogenous, not as educated, and that sect and/or ethnicity played a larger role in their identity, such as the Shu’la neighborhood. Even the working-class neighborhoods could be divided between the working-class slums and those that were located closer to the richer areas. However, this was not necessarily the case with such older, more established working-class areas as Sheikh Omar and Dora, both of which were mixed.231

Over time, new forms of neighborhoods developed that were more organized, based on people’s accomplishments, and more middle-class. During the 1970s rural-urban migration increased from the south, the area from which the majority of the migrants came; Kurds and people from other provinces also began to migrate. In addition, certain areas were mixed mostly along secular lines. These mixed neighborhoods became highly politicized after 2003.

4.3.2.1 Nursing

Some of the most poetic expressions of coexistence revolved around stories of breastfeeding. “This is all good, and everyone will tell you this,” Mariana said. “However

231 Amir [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, international telephone conversation, 27 December 2007.
you do not know about the breastfeeding.”

Startled, I looked at her and asked what she meant. She reached for a picture of her grandmother and told me the story of breastfeeding:

Iraqi society is always used to being together. My grandmother played a very big role in my life and the way that I was raised. She used to tell me stories about when she was growing up. I am from a small town like I told you, El-Qosh, and there were four religions represented there: Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Yazidis. Before, during the time of my grandmother, before Iraq even became a modern state, there was no public transport, so when it snows, people were isolated and this affected our supply of food and electricity. People used to bake around the tanoor.\textsuperscript{233} Women gathered to help each other at the tanoor, and only the women baked there. When the children cried for milk, the mother carried the child to the tanoor to ask who has milk from the women at the tanoor. And any women who had milk would take the child and no one asked what religion the person was. The children do not know who nursed them: Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Yazidi … this is how children were raised. If anyone thinks they are pure Muslim or Christian or whatever, they are wrong. I do not think that there is anyone who is purely Muslim or Christian, [for] there are so many children nursed from women of different religions. That is how Iraqi children were raised. This is the “Real Iraq.”

Mariana’s comment that no Iraqi is purely Muslim, or Christian, or otherwise refers to the intermixing that existed among the different communities. Even though someone may have had a particular religion, their exposure to others allowed them to develop a part of that religion or ethnicity in their identity. Khalid, a successful surgeon, made the same point: “You know I was breastfed by a Christian woman; she was our next door neighbor in Baghdad. I am proud of that. So in a way I am half Christian.”

The way that religion pervaded the interviews indicates the level of frustration interviewees have with it today. Mariana and Khalid not only went as far as saying that

\textsuperscript{232} Mariana [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 19 December 2007.
\textsuperscript{233} The oven where the bread was made.
\textsuperscript{234} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{235} Khalid [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, handwritten interview, Virginia, 11 December 2007.
there was peaceful coexistence among these people, but also displayed an even further and more powerful point: each of these individuals, despite their acquired birth identity, had also assumed other identities as a result of the makeup and functioning of Iraqi society. The *tanoor* and breastfeeding image display a society that, at least on the surface, did not think about religion as a divisive force, but as one that is normal, accepted, and welcomed.

### 4.3.3 Schools/Dorms

Whereas families living in neighborhoods eventually retreated into their households, the diversity of Iraqi society was often found in dorms. In September 1958, Zahid was accepted into a prestigious program to attend a university in England. The year before he left, he moved from Mosul to Baghdad to enter a one-year “Preparation for Foreign Missions” program to prepare him for living and studying in England. He shared a dorm room with six other people of different backgrounds. The 124 students selected came from all backgrounds – Christian (Chaldean and Assyrian), Muslim (Sunni, and Shi’a), Kurd, Arab, Turkomen, Armenian – and were considered the crème of the crop and lived together without any ethnic or sect-based segregation. Zahid said that the “political street was presented in the dorm as students who identify themselves from all political backgrounds were present, but we all got along and spoke about any differences intellectually.”

Born more than thirty years later, Mustafa attended his first year of university in fall 2003. He similarly spoke of the dorms as being a site of the Iraqi mosaic’s various

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elements. Mustafa believed that identity became an issue in dorm life, but that it never got “too messy”:

Iraqis in their nature like to have groups, but no one erased their personality when they were in these groups. Sure, people take sides and different political opinions, but everyone accepts each of the sides. Sometimes people do mudahara\(^{237}\) if someone is from another area just for the jokes of it, but there was never any hiqid.\(^{238}\) There were always a couple of students who were very sectarian for one reason or another. But they were the minority and no one really respected them amongst the students. I am Christian, so one time this student came up to me and said *inta min jama`ita* (you are from our group) and that we should become friends and make our own group. I thought he was very stupid, and I did the opposite – I didn’t even talk to him. People took sides against idiots. One Sunni kid wanted to tell three of us (a Shi`a, another Sunni, and me) why Sunna are better. The three of us argued against him and told him what he is saying is wrong. Of course there are differences. The dorm was a microcosm of the rest of Iraq, [and] everyone wants to be right. But students respected others’ perspectives and the problems were always solved. I was Christian, but these identities were not relevant. We took these things as jokes. I used to fast in Ramadan.\(^{239}\)

### 4.3.4 Marriage: the Su-shis,\(^ {240}\) and so on

*There was so much inter-marriage between Kurds and Arabs. My dad is Arab, my mom is Kurdish, so?*\(^ {241}\) - Ari

One of the main pieces of evidence Iraqis use to prove their former coexistence is marriage. Whenever the topic arises, many of them refer to the number of mixed marriages in their families that span ethnicities, religions, and sects. Faris said:

There is something that people just do not understand. I cannot choose who lives in my country. Sometimes I cannot choose who my neighbor is, unless I make a decision to move if I don’t like my neighbor. I can’t choose who I go to school with. But you know what I do choose – I choose who I marry. I helped my sister choose who she married. Two years ago, during the war, my cousin wanted to marry my sister. You know this is normal in Iraq. He is not successful, he wastes

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\(^{237}\) In Iraqi Arabic, this refers to innocent, sarcastic, and harmless joking around.

\(^{238}\) Arabic for “hateful envy.”

\(^{239}\) Mustafa [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 13 December 2007.

\(^{240}\) Referring to someone who is half Sunni, half Shi`i. This has become common lingo among Iraqi Americans.

his time, and he would not be good enough for my sister – but he was Sunni like us, of course. At the same time, a really nice, decent, religious and successful guy from Basra – Shi`a – wanted to marry my sister. He spoke to my family, and we did not object, and today they are married. If I hated the Shi`a so much, why would I give my baby sister, my blood away to a Shi`a? I am sick of this talk.\textsuperscript{242}

Omar continued in this same vein as regards sectarian tension and described what he called the “Iraqi matrix” by explaining his family’s own history of mixed marriage. Although his father was religious, he never prevented his children from marrying anyone based on their religion or ethnicity. Rather, according to Omar, it is his religion that kept him open-minded vis-à-vis other people. According to Omar, when religion is used politically and as a divisive tool, as is happening now, that is when the real danger comes in:

One of my sisters is married to a Shi`a, another to a Kurd. My brother also married a Kurd, and my daughter married a Shi`a. My brother who died in a plane crash was married to a Christian woman – and no one cared. We used to interact with and have so many Christian friends. This was the matrix, this was the texture the Iraqi mosaic. It was so beautiful. I do not know what happened.\textsuperscript{243}

One’s level of education, level of religiosity, and locale are important elements of this discussion. Although many boast that intermarriage is a regular phenomenon, it could be a phenomenon among those who are wealthier, more educated, and/or more secular. According to Leena:

My mom’s side of the family was very mixed. My mom got married in 1942, and she is Shi`a, to my father, who is Sunni. They got married in a small city where this does not really matter much and everyone knows everyone. I don’t know. My family is well-to-do and secular. Maybe in a more religious city the sect would matter. Maybe they would oppose it. We do not know, for example, if this is a concern in Najaf. Where someone obtains their education is very important.

\textsuperscript{242} Faris [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 8 January 2008. I italicized this to present Faris’ emphasis on this remark.
\textsuperscript{243} Omar [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 1 March 2008.
Religious people rely on religious scholars for their education. That is the only thing they ever learn, so maybe sect plays more of a role for them.\textsuperscript{244}

However, as Layla told us above, although there is at times a correlation between sect and city, there should not be an automatic assumption that intermarriage is ruled out. Although her father is a Shi`i from Najaf, he still married a Sunni woman from Baghdad.

The levels of education and religiosity that she speaks of play a significant role in the discussion of marriage as well. Leena’s family is secular and more culturally conservative than practicing. She received her education from public school and, although she was enrolled in Islamic studies classes, questioned God’s existence and religion’s role in her life while growing up. Eventually, she began to consider herself an atheist. Since religion did not play a role in her family’s life, it was unimportant as to which sect a future spouse might belong. Furthermore, Leena makes a correlation between one’s level of education and wealth: the more educated families were usually wealthier. In her case, her father was an extremely educated and liberal man who owned a construction company. Her family was not only exposed to various ethnic and religious communities in Iraq, but also to the world through travel. Sect and ethnicity took a back seat in such a situation, for diversity was a normal part of their life.

Leena made an implicit remark about locale as well, although she later took it back. She mentioned that her best friend was Christian, and that her family stayed exclusively within its close circle of family and friends in Hila, and then later in their Baghdad neighborhood: “I have no idea if there were these problems in other cities in Iraq. But I

\textsuperscript{244} Leena [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 26 December 2007.
mean in college we were all together, and we all saw each other as Iraqi, Muslim, whatever … so I just don’t know if it was something only in my neighborhood.”

Ironically her husband, a lawyer from Najaf, married her and similarly did not care about her sect. Thus it is simplistic to argue that locality determines how sectarian one may or may not one be, for many other factors must be considered as well.

Both Leena and Layla explained that they are from the capital city and from very liberal families. In their opinion, their families’ approach to marriage differed tremendously from other more conservative families. Waleed made an important observation in direct response to their comments:

A lot of this depends on the socio-economic class. If families are conservative, they want someone from their background. Mixing is when you are from a liberal society, not a society that is conservative. Even though I am from Mosul and we are a Sunni city, my uncle married a Shi’a woman and there was not an issue with this. My family was above these petty differentiations between Sunna or Shi’a or whatever.

Waleed’s comment addresses two points: a family’s socio-economic level and conservative or liberal worldview. Although these interviewees related mixed marriages to wealth and education, most of my interviewees related instances of intermarriage in their families, even those who came from more homogenous neighborhoods and less wealthy backgrounds. The only family that resisted intermarriage was the Yazidi family, as their religion prohibits marriage to a non-Yazidi. Similarly, Muslim women cannot marry Christian men for religious reasons, whereas there were many instances of Muslim men marrying Christian women—which is permitted in Islam.

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245 Ibid.
Peter and Marion-Farouk Sluglett provide a sophisticated and historical analysis of what the interviewees were trying to express. If we look at the Sunni/Shi`a divide in Iraq, we find that there are no precise statistics to refer to, for no census provides such information. There are only details of Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, Jews, and Kurdish speakers in the only comprehensive census available from 1957. According to the Slugletts, it is true that there are more Shi`a than Sunna, but this fact has been wrongly understood and given connotations that it does not have in the Iraqi context. “Society cannot be divided into exploiting Sunna and exploited Shi`is. Have and have-nots are based in Iraq, as in any other country, on class, not sectarian divisions.” The decisive factor in Iraqi society is the urban/rural divide that Leena alluded to: essentially, one’s class and socio-economic background speaks louder than one’s sect.

4.3.5 Education and Manners

Most of the interviewees expressed a view that stems mainly from their educational backgrounds: part of Iraq’s deterioration can be attributed to the fact that the country has been left to uneducated Iraqis. Most of the educated Iraqis either left long ago or have fled since 2003. An essential characteristic of the “Real Iraqi,” one that sets him/her apart from today’s “Iraqi,” according to many of the interviewees, is having a high level of education. Iraqis today have a once-enviable education system that has been devastated by war and sanctions. Up-to-date technologies, advancements, and developments have not reached Iraq for decades, much to the detriment of schools and universities. Even if

248 Ibid., 85.
students made it to university, the high level of unemployment made it difficult for them to find jobs. An engineer could easily be found driving a taxi to make a living. Most members of Iraq’s educated class have either been killed or have left Iraq as refugees. Thus, the country has been left to the less educated and those who have infiltrated in from neighboring countries. In addition to education, tolerance, compassion, and generosity are also listed as attributes of the “Real Iraqi.”

These “Real Iraqi” qualities resonate with the attributes of the social class to which my interviewees belonged. I mentioned this to Khalid, one of the interviewees, and said that I believed that the Iraqis still living in Iraq are very much “Real Iraqis” and that their life experiences may have made them different from those Iraqis in the diaspora. He answered that this may be true, but that

these people are like Saddam, [for] they do not want what is best for Iraq and run around without education like the Ba’ath, creating havoc and problems for our country. The “Real Iraqis” are those who value education, the great Iraqi educational system that we had, and those who should have been the true rulers of Iraq.249

My interviewees have a black-and-white picture of Iraqis today. They think of themselves as being the “Real Iraqis” because they represent the past, when their socio-economic class still existed and was prominent. Those who are living in Iraq now have come to represent the current situation, which, in their minds, is anything but the “Real Iraq.” Thus these “Iraqis” bear no resemblance to themselves when they were living in Iraq.

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4.3.6 Islamic Activism and Resistance

Other interviewees cited activism and resistance efforts, both of which require joint efforts, support, and protection, as examples of the “Real Iraq.” The colonial presence in Iraq, and throughout the Arab world, was largely resisted. Shayma’s anti-colonialist, anti-British, and pro-monarchy father frequently engaged in resistance efforts and ended up in jail for three years. Upon his release, he participated in the Rashid al-Gaylani coup.\textsuperscript{250} He published a newspaper that contained his anti-British editorials; when he was ordered to cease publication, he refused and spent the next 3.5 years in various prisons located in Fao and Ṭāmara. During those years, he became even more of a nationalist and became acquainted with the tribal system:

My mother and siblings picked up and moved to Ṭāmara to be next to my father, even though we had no source of income. Our good friends from Mosul and heads of Arab tribes – they were both Sunni and Shi’a and mixed tribes – helped us tremendously. We used to visit these tribes, cook together, and spend Friday together. Everyone knew everyone. We used to share a lot. Meanwhile, my father still informally published his newspaper and people would still read his newspaper so that they [could] continue to show him support. He used to allow others to publish anti-British articles in there to keep the movement going. This is how the community was. We supported each other. And you see there was really no torture or violence against each other, or even from the monarchy.\textsuperscript{251}

Shayma wished to portray the strong bonds that existed in Iraqi society irrespective of religious background. She told me that although her family is Christian, their religious background played no role in how they were welcomed and protected by an array of different communities. The people with whom her family interacted supported her father’s cause and saw this as reason enough to take care of the family.

\textsuperscript{250} The coup d’etat of April 1, 1941 presided over by Rashid Ali al-Gaylani and directed against the monarch, “in the shape of the regent Ṭab al-Ilaḥ.” Tripp, A History of Iraq, 103.
\textsuperscript{251} Shayma [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 20 January 2008.
Ali said that the causes he worked for were similarly supported across sectarian lines. While in Mosul, he led a group of students to organize Islamic activities for two main purposes: (1) religious education and (2) political awareness in order to rid Iraq of political corruption. Since Mosul is a Sunni town, the organizers were of Sunni background. His efforts were further solidified when he moved to Baghdad, where he solidified his Islamic activism and maintained his Mosul contacts. Simultaneously, a Shi’a group, Hizb al-Dawa, was forming in Najaf. According to Ali, both groups were open-minded and sought to provide an alternative to the various politically corrupt governments in Baghdad, especially in light of the Mahdawi trials that took place in the summer of 1958 after the violent overthrow of the monarchy and Nuri al-Said. Both these groups were led by leaders whose main goal was to bring the two groups closer together. Symbolically, north and south met in Baghdad. Imam Khalisi, a Shi’a cleric, brought the Sunni and Shi’a activists together, and Sheikh Zahawi, a Sunni cleric, did the same. Both leaders were greatly admired by their cohorts.

4.4 Some Exceptions: The Kurdish Dream

As opposed to the “Real Iraq” fantasy, such nationalist Kurds as Zhala, Tara, Rawa, and Dakho would like to see a different dream realized. To Tara and Dakho, the “Real Iraq” is the one depicted in the news today. Alternatively Rawa, who has had little or no exposure to Arab Iraq and has very little affiliation with it, has been living her parents’ dream of an independent Kurdistan. Her connection to Iraq is based on negative feelings

253 Ibid.
254 Ibid.
toward the Iraqi government, as she was raised in the United States. Her parents’ goal was never to separate from the Arabs, as much as it was to see the fruition of a Kurdish nation-state. On the other hand, Zhala and Dakho have faced discrimination for being Kurdish and, in Dakho’s case, Yazidi. Given these realities, they feel that they have only a minimal link to the Iraqi Arab state.

The creation of a Kurdish nation-state will provide an appropriate home for those Kurds who feel that they do not belong in an Iraqi Arab state. Consequently, they see the current ethnic and sectarian strife as a natural phenomenon that has always been there. They believe that it lies in years of repressed angst and resentment. When thinking of Iraq, they imagine not a unified country that includes Kurdish cities, but of the Kurdish north as an independent state. Their memories are localized (focused on their villages), while Zhala, whose memories of Baghdad are of her friendships, dreams of her eventual return to Erbil. In short, her sentiments, feelings, and memories of landscape are linked to Kurdistan, where she is able to speak her native language and feel at home. Both Dakho and Zhala have a Kurdish flag in their homes; Rawa met with President George W. Bush in 2003 in order to take part in actualizing her dream of an independent Kurdistan:

I had a picture of my father who was killed by the PKK in my hand, and I was trembling when I walked into the oval office. I told President Bush that I was there to represent my father and that I finally had a chance an opportunity to make his dream of an independent Kurdistan come true.255

However, she is disillusioned with Kurdish politics and the effect they are having on Kurdish society. Rawa believed that the Kurdistan she knew has changed dramatically

and that the current Kurdish political leaders do not know the real value and meaning of democracy. Therefore, they are creating ground for new forms of corruption in the government. Rawa, like the Iraqi Arab diasporists, is similarly creating an image of the “Real Kurdistan” to which she considers herself connected and that maintains her and her family connection to Kurdistan. Rawa expressed this feeling, which was not shared by all of my Kurdish interviewees, below:

I still have Kurdish cultural beliefs. These are the cultural beliefs of the traditional Kurdistan. My heart is with the traditional Kurdistan – the Kurdistan I knew in the early 1990s. It was sweet, polite, and so beautiful. But as I continued going [there], I felt that it was negatively changing. The last time I went was in 2006. All this talk of democracy and growth of the economy has changed the people. It has made them more greedy, materialistic, and self-centered. It is just not the real and traditional Kurdistan I knew when I went before. Things have changed so much.256

Her conception of the “Real Kurdistan” differs from that of the majority’s notion of the “Real Iraq.” The latter notion was created after the current cycle of violence broke out in 2003, while to Rawa Kurdistan has been changing over the years due to its own economic and political development. In her view, it is deteriorating not economically, but morally. Similarly, she feels that the traditions are changing, thereby creating a new brand of people with whom she can no longer identify. As a result, she identifies with the “Real Kurdistan” and feels that she and other Kurds in the area are the “Real Kurds,” the ones who still hold on to the “real” ways and represent the people she met during her trips in the 1990s.

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256 Rawa [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 4 December 2007.
4.5 The End of the “Real Iraq”: Government Manipulation

There was an idea that there has to be allegiance to the collective, not to the individual. But collective society depends on a leader, and there was no leader that people could listen to. So they started to focus on the smaller leaders, and these smaller leaders were sectarian. And this is where part of the internalization process of the sectarian narrative is found. Leaders in Iraq would be working for their own interest. They were not adequate to be good leaders. \textsuperscript{257} – Shatha

To many of the interviewees, the “Real Iraq” was destroyed over time by dirty sectarian politics and government manipulation. While the blame mostly falls on the current American occupation and control, they say that using Iraq’s diversity as a dividing tool is nothing new. In fact, this situation is being helped and pushed by the anti-government feelings created over the years as the various governments pitted groups of people against each other. As a result, they have created a shared reading of the past and assert that current events are a product of politics, not Iraqi society, and in no way indicate any degree of real communal hatred. Rather, this is only a continuation of previous governmental attempts to manipulate Iraqi society in order to maintain control over a resource-rich land.

Many interviewees argued that the American occupation is no different from the rule of previous governments that placed their self-interest before that of a unified Iraqi society. Yahya, like many of my other interview subjects, has created a personal outline of how various governments used and abused Iraq’s diversity. He attributes the current violence to a host of possible sources, among them Iran, which wants to increase its regional power and see a Shi`a-governed Iraq, as this will make their control over Iraq less difficult. He compares this Iranian tactic to the British and overall imperial divide

\textsuperscript{257} Shatha [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 8 January 2008.
and conquer strategy, which has now been inherited by the Americans who, in his opinion, do everything for the sake of pleasing Israel. To maintain American dominance and Israeli national security, they have implemented the taqseem\textsuperscript{258} strategy to ensure the discontinuity of a unified and strong Iraqi nation-state. Now Iraqis, who are scared of one another, turn to the militias for protection. Yahya asserted:

> It is absolutely devastating that this is happening in the only country where you can see Shi`a and Sunni families integrated – my sister married a Shi`a, my wife is Shi`a … this whole thing is just not in our mentality. We are one united Iraq? Why do the Kurds want their own independent country? After 1992 the no-fly zones were instituted … this gave them semi-independence. When the Turks have been targeting the Kurds in northern Iraq we were sad and angry, because that is part of our country. Also before Saddam, the unity between the Shi`a and the Sunni was stronger. Most of the [government] ministers were Shi`a. Saddam took this unity … people were united, but then he started the separation. This is what the root of the problem is.\textsuperscript{259}

The interviewees traced government manipulation beginning with the Ottomans and throughout modern Iraq’s history. The interviewees provide minimal information on how this was done, but are certain that the government had a role in dividing Iraqi society. Certainly, there is historical evidence to support this claim. Katherine Kern argues that while the Ottoman Empire ruled Iraq, there were signs of sectarian politics as Istanbul purposely differentiated between the Shi`a and the Sunna when it came to marriage and military conscription. According to her, the Ottomans modified the concept of citizenship to fit their own geopolitical concerns and thus excluded persons on the basis of ethnicity, gender, and religion\textsuperscript{260}.

\textsuperscript{258} Arabic for “division.”
\textsuperscript{259} Yahya [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 23 December 2007.
The Ottomans made one, and only one very important exception to the imperial definition of citizenship. In 1874, responding to reports of large-scale conversion of the Iraqi population from Sunni to Shi’a Islam, the Ottomans enacted a law prohibiting marriages between Ottoman women and Iranian men. The importance of the demographic phenomenon of marriage becomes evident when examining Ottoman policies for the frontier province of Iraq. In this region, Ottoman attempts to bring the province under the control of the central administration were directly connected to geopolitical realities that centered on the centuries-long rivalry between Ottoman and Iranian leaders, which often took the form of Sunni-Shia’a hostility. [Ottoman] officials had the perception that Shi’ism was increasing among the population and seriously threatening the government’s control over the province. In an attempt to halt this increase, the Ottoman government enacted a legal prohibition against marriages between Ottoman women and Iranian men, a measure they believed would consolidate Ottoman control over the province in a number of ways.

Fearing Iranian infiltration, the Ottomans created these laws to maintain control. Similarly many of the interviewees cited the British as wanting to maintain control of Iraq by formulating a government that was more favorable of groups who supported their presence than those who did not; as the Ottomans wanted to maintain control of Sunni-Shi’a marriages so that they can eliminate the Shi’a influence. Many of my interview subjects see the British as the primary perpetrators of sowing the seeds of sectarian division in Iraq, citing the faruq tasud policy of the imperial period. The picture, however, is far more complicated than that related by the interviewees. The British found that the Sunni aristocracy and wealthy were a lot easier to work with, and these Iraqis similarly found it easy to transfer their loyalties from the Ottomans to the British. Faysal I (d. 1933), the new king of Iraq, was a Sunni from Hijaz whose principal Iraqi supporters were Sunna from the service aristocracy and Ottoman officers who had rallied behind

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261 Ibid., 9.
262 Ibid.
263 Arabic for “divide and conquer.”
him during the Arab Revolt\textsuperscript{264} and when he was in Syria. On the other hand, Ayatollah Mohammed Taqi Shirazi (d. 1920), the \textit{marja`-i taqlid}\textsuperscript{265} and the leading Shi` cleric of his day, issued a \textit{fatwa}\textsuperscript{266} on March 1, 1920, asserting that serving the British was illegal.\textsuperscript{267} Of course there were several instances when the British authorities and Iraqi government, on occasion, used sectarian divisions for their benefit. For example, the British encouraged the formation of a Shi`a party, the Hizb al-Nahda, that would fight for Shi`a rights and more representation in the government.\textsuperscript{268} However, the British opposed Shi`a military conscription, fearing that a large Shi`a army would threaten its “special position.” The Hizb al-Nahda, on the other hand, favored it. The 1920 Iraqi revolt showed that the Shi`a were willing to unite with Sunni nationalists against British imperialism, and this point resonated in the minds of the British, therefore limiting the efforts of the Shi`a.\textsuperscript{269}

Beginning with and the years following the 1958 revolution, a series of groups of Iraqi army officers came to power and ruled according to their nationalist agenda. Furthermore, when Saddam seized power, loyalty to him and the party was far more important than sectarianism. According to the Slugletts:

\begin{quote}
What is crucial [at the moment]\textsuperscript{270} is whether one is a Ba`ath or not, and the regime is busily trying to inculcate Ba`ath doctrines at all levels in the educational system, from primary school to university, in an attempt to win
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{264} Revolt started by Sherif Hussein ibn Ali, at Britain’s urging, to secure independence from the Ottoman Turks.
\item \textsuperscript{265} Refers to a Shi`i religious leader who has authority to make legal rulings on religion for the Shi`a community.
\item \textsuperscript{266} Arabic for “religious edict.”
\item \textsuperscript{267} Sluglett, “Implications,” 5.
\item \textsuperscript{268} Ibid., 83.
\item \textsuperscript{269} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{270} This article was written before Saddam’s overthrow.
\end{itemize}
adherents, from whatever quarter. Shi‘i Ba‘athists do not find obstacles to advancement, though, as has been pointed out, fewer Shi‘is are attracted to Ba‘athism in the first place. Furthermore, the Iraqi Ba‘athists are fundamentally non-religious, in the sense that they are not putting forward a politico-religious program, or attempting to project a specifically Muslim image, far less a Sunni one. It is important in this connection to note that this aspect of the regime has helped to alienate the conservative religious groups of both Sunni and Shi‘i sects … The composition of cabinets, or of the Revolutionary Command Council and its successors, will depend, as it does now and has always done, upon the realities of the power structure in Iraq, and not on any hazy concept of sectarian solidarity.⁷²¹

In my interview with Rayanne, she explained the role of the Saddam government in bringing about what is taking place today:

Saddam set the precedent for what is taking place today. Sunni, Shi‘a – Saddam was mean to everyone. He was not religious. He was only inclusive of his tribe. They are the only ones who didn’t get hurt. He didn’t have any idea of Sunni or Shi‘a. They killed anyone, didn’t say this was a Sunni or a Shi‘a. There was coexistence before the war, and this still exists with the moderate and educated people, who are a majority of Iraqis.⁷²² But there are groups, they are extremists and they are sectarian … and that is why the elections were like this … people voted on sectarian lines for protection.⁷²³

The Slugletts assert that Saddam felt threatened by the Iranian revolution and thus the Ba‘ath began to portray Iraqi Shi‘a as a dangerous fifth column of pro-Iranian sympathizers and traitors.⁷²⁴ Saddam turned them into potential enemies of the state, and Ba‘ath hostility toward them remained throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Meanwhile law and order in the country was breaking down, and Iraqi citizens, who could no longer

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²⁷¹ Sluglett, Sunni/Shi‘i, 85-86.
²⁷² Although there is no factual evidence to support this claim, it is known that a majority of the educated and wealthy Iraqis who could leave have already done so. This is why many Iraqis in the diaspora argue that Iraq has been left to the uneducated and that the levels of violence and corruption have increased.
²⁷⁴ I would like to qualify this point. This is not necessarily accurate, as the great majority of the Shi‘a living in Iraq are of Arab origin. During the war, Saddam needed everyone’s loyalty, especially the Shi‘a’s, and so did not want to give them any reason to side with the Iranians. And they paid the price, as a majority of those who fought were Shi‘a. However, it is known that Saddam insisted on differentiating those Iraqi Shi‘a who were of Persian origin.
depend on the state, turned to such pre-state organizations as the family, tribe, kin, and sect to protect themselves from the state. During this time, Shi`a opposition parties started to gather momentum.\textsuperscript{275}

In 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority,\textsuperscript{276} whether its members knew what they were doing or not, institutionalized sectarianism by creating a \textit{de facto} sectarian quota system and then establishing a government of mostly religious, rather than secular, individuals.\textsuperscript{277} According to Azmi Bishara: “Today’s Iraq occupation ideologues have concocted three super-simplistic myths to which they have reduced contemporary Iraqi history: a Sunni-based Baathist regime ruled over the Shi`a, the oppressed Shi`a appealed to the US and Britain for help, and the resistance to the occupation is really a sectarian war between the Sunni and Shi`a.”\textsuperscript{278} This mentality was the basis of the quota system installed by Paul Bremer in early 2003.

The legalization of a quota system came at a time when there was a power vacuum in the country, when the only organized groups were the Kurds and the Shi`a parties. These two groups quickly took hold of power, and the division among people increased even more as they rallied behind their groups’ agendas. Rather than devising an agenda for a unified Iraq, various agendas were placed on the table. When election time came, people did not necessarily vote for the best candidate, as hundreds of parties were on the ballot

\textsuperscript{275} Sluglett, \textit{Implications}, 12.
\textsuperscript{276} The Coalitional Provisional Authority (CPA) was a transitional government established after the invasion of Iraq by the United States and Great Britain in 2003, and headed by Paul Bremer.
\textsuperscript{277} Sluglett, \textit{Implications}, 13.
and made such an undertaking practically impossible. Hence, they were forced to vote for the party with which they were most strongly affiliated, namely, their sect or ethnicity.

The 2003 Iraq war created several wars, as people did not unite after the American invasion under the guise of Iraqi unity. Instead, different groups made it their top priority to push their political agendas and perceived rightful claims to political power. Various groups who believed that they had been repressed and misrepresented during Saddam’s rule wanted to gain control. Of course Saddam’s government targeted some groups more than others. Nevertheless, his regime is being wrongly misrepresented in order to fulfill particular political aims. More specifically, there exists a common misperception that the Sunna did not support the 2003 Iraq war because they supported the “Sunni” Ba’ath regime. Indeed this is a false accusation. Inherent in Saddam’s rule was the maintenance of his economic and political power. He saw the Shi`a and Kurds, both of whom had strong leaders, as threatening his power. Furthermore, if there were more “Sunna than Shi`a” in power during Saddam’s rule, this had nothing to do with him being a “Sunni,” and everything with the fact that they mainly hailed from his village and tribe in Tikrit. This false reading is extremely dangerous and has set groups against each other in Iraq, such as Sunni and Shi`a militia groups. These political groups have organized their own militias that are blindly killing innocent civilians and fragmenting Iraqi society.

For the most part, my interviewees blame the government for what is happening in Iraq, because it is beyond them and unfathomable. There is a limited explanation and understanding as to why the violence has erupted in the way that it has since 2003. In order to reconcile this, they have engaged in this twofold process: (1) depending on their
memories and creating the “Real Iraq” as part of their real identity, and (2) blaming the violence on various political factors and their government’s self-interest. Whether or not the American forces purposely sowed the seeds of more conflict or if they simply misunderstood Iraqi society is unknown. The amount of unknown information is what complicates the Iraqi situation and what forces these diasporists to rely on their memories and perceptions, for these are the only things that they do know of what is left of Iraq.

4.6 The “Real Iraq” across Generations

The sectarianism discourse is phenomenal in that it has penetrated into all of the interviewees’ psyches at the same level, that is, they all begin speaking of their identities defensively around this discourse. Similarly, the “Real Iraq” image is the same throughout the various age groups and generations. The sample group ranges from ages twenty-one to seventy-nine and may be said to consist of two distinct “generations: pre-Ba`ath (interviewees born and raised before the Ba`ath came to power in 1968) and post-Ba`ath (interviewees who grew up during the Ba`ath’s rule). The post-Ba`ath generation similarly narrated stories of coexistence like their parents and grandparents. Their memories were not as positive, however, for they had grown up in an atmosphere of fear under the Ba`ath regime.

Throughout the 1960s and up until the early 1980s, many interviewees noted that a level of economic stability, regardless of the number of coups and bloodbaths, had followed the 1958 revolution and overthrow of the monarchy. However, the economic situation was overshadowed by a difficult political situation. “We were raised to doubt

\[279\] In this context, “raised” signifies their childhood and high school years.
people because of survival, because of the political situation. We had to be careful. This was as a result of the Ba’ath party, and it was a new phenomenon. We had to be very conscious of the political situation. Across the board, Iraqis were cautious,”

He also said that the 1960s and 1970s were relatively more economically stable. That was always the positive side. However, the “strangling feeling of a police state of government control” was unbearable.

The pre-Ba’ath interviewees did not relate the same sort of doubt that Waleed had. This doubt of others followed Waleed to the United States: “In the United States, I would say that I am Palestinian amongst Arabs and Iraqis. I didn’t want people to know that I am Iraqi. I was afraid of Iraqi people spying for the government in gatherings. Anyone growing [up] in a police state would be afraid.”

Those who were born in the late 1960s carry with them a feeling of loss. They feel as if they had never experienced a time of peace while living in Iraq and that their happy moments were overshadowed by the dark reality of the Ba’ath, who controlled all aspects of Iraqi society. Furthermore, their “picture” of Iraq has been tainted by government repression. In their relationship with Iraq, they feel as if they were born into war and struggle. Many of their memories were of the early 1980s, when the Iran-Iraq war was beginning. Their parents and older relatives frequently told them that the current situation was temporary. Amir related his parents’ image of Iraq as he used to complain about the war:

281 Ibid. 60.
Our parents and relatives constructed a rosy past, *ayam il-khair wa ayam al `iz*. We always grew up thinking that the war is temporary and eventually things were going to be *khair*. Things were going to get better. Iraqi nationalism existed [and] Iraqi sentiment existed because of the narrative that the kids grew up with through our parents’ and relatives’ stories. How things during the 50s, 60s, and 70s were so much better, and actually now we were living through an exceptional time. And that was always the case. And this had a lot to do with relating to the war as an exception, as not normal, not natural. But people started to get exhausted. We started to get exhausted. Our parents started to get exhausted of their stories. So many people couldn’t take this exception to the rule anymore. That period was not rosy because I did not know it. They instilled the idea that it was temporary and that it will not continue. But I do not know anything else except knowing war in Iraq. The 1990s transformed the fabric of society, and people became more resentful of that transformation that was going on. People were so hurt in our society. There was increasing crime [and] corruption because of the economic situation, and there was an increase in people leaving the country. And that’s why I left in 1998. This sentiment grew in us that there was never a rosy picture of Iraq.

Amir’s experience is explained by Marianne Hirsch’s concept of post-memory, namely, “the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are impacted by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events” that cannot be accessed or apprehended directly. Interestingly, it seems as though the re-creation of the “Real Iraq” is not happening only now, but that this has been a recurring theme for the last thirty-plus years of Iraqi history. The point of reference almost always is pre-Ba’ath Iraq. For this reason, I chose to call them the “loss generation,” as taken from one of my interviewees. They had lost hope of the rosy image painted by their families and relatives. Amir said:

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283 Arabic for “the good old days, the days of greatness and of good.”
284 Amir [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, international telephone conversation, 27 December 2007.
One of the things that shaped me is this whole notion of loss. I felt that I lost a lot. I lost living in pre-Saddam Iraq. When I came here, I lost the memories, the places, the house. Suddenly I was de-rooted, and I felt that it was one of the most painful moments in my life to lose that piece of material that testifies to your existence and that was in your memories. That feeling of loss - I am currently trying to deal with it and come out of that mentality. That feeling of loss of something concrete, of something you cling to, [is] very intimate, very private.288

They were formulating their identities around war and an image of a country that they had never experienced. Their forms of nationalism were certainly created at home, and they do relate positive memories of their time in Iraq; however, such nationalism was created through an unhealthy means of government propaganda. They remained close to the concept of the Iraqi nation but that did not necessarily mean they connected to the state. For them, the idea of a nation-state does not necessarily include a viable and strong government. As Amir said:

I am afraid to go back to an Iraq that I do not know or one that I would like it to be but is not there [now]. I live in this kind of proxy. I find Iraq in the diaspora, and this is my own kind of way. I think Iraq is an idea and can be carried many places. And I cannot substitute the place and the setting and the landscape, but [I] can live abroad as an Iraqi. The Iraq I like is better and can only be found in the diaspora now. Here it is closer to the Iraq that I know, but in a different landscape.289

Amir’s notion that Iraq can be found in the diaspora is a common theme among many of the interviewees, as they have all recreated their idea of Iraq through their memories and their day-to-day lives and lifestyles. The future of the Iraqi nation-state is questioned here, for there is some comfort in bringing what is good from Iraq (viz., the positive memories and its beautiful social elements) to the diaspora. The ability to live in the “Real Iraq,” which makes them feel closer to their Iraqi-ness, makes them feel more

288 Ibid.
289 Ibid.
disconnected from the actual Iraqi state. In post-Ba’ath Iraq, the state fostered negative (as opposed to positive) feelings. The state always used Iraqi nationalism and identity against the people, and so Iraqis had to find other ways to identify with the state and be Iraqi without linking themselves to it.

The contested issue is not whether they should be called members of the “Iraqi diaspora.” Rather, the issue is territorial. In fact, none of the Arab interviewees contested being linked to Iraq in one form or another; however, the image of Iraq existing in their minds varies. To many, the “Real Iraq” does not only revolve around the post-1920 territorial boundary, but extends back thousands of years in their pre-memory to the area’s ancient civilizations and empires.

According to Fortier, diasporic memory is “place based” but not “place bound.” Understood in this light, diasporic memory can potentially produce geographical definitions of diaspora and, in particular, “the idea that the lost homeland is the defining moment of diasporic identity.” In light of Baronian et al.’s analysis of Fortier, diasporic memory creates patterns of attachment across time and space and spins “threads of continuity” that no longer have any connection with the homeland. Consequently, memory transcends the territorial definition of diaspora as well as the logic of dispersal and return, thereby becoming a source of diasporic identity. Fortier says: “Memory, rather than territory, is the principle ground of identity-formation in diaspora cultures,

291 Baronian, Besser, and Jansen, eds., Diaspora and Memory, 12.
292 Ibid., 12.
293 Ibid.
where ‘territory’ is de-centered and exploded into multiple settings.”

Even though they are deterritorialized from their original homeland, these Iraqis’ enchantment with their memories, pasts, cultures, and traditions reterritorializes them through a diasporic space characterized by their friendships, bonds, political discussions, home decorations, mannerisms, and social intricacies. In essence they are a diaspora of a memory of a modern-day territorialized place called “Iraq.”

Many of the interviewees who grew up during the Ba`ath era came from wealthy backgrounds, lived in upper-class neighborhoods, and often had parents who served in government and ministry positions. Part of an upper-class social network that attended social clubs, they were secluded as Iraqi upper middle-class elites and thus had only limited exposure to what was taking place in other parts of Iraq or in other governorates. Naturally, they relate a specific narrative that certainly differs from those belonging to other socio-economic levels.

Those who grew up during the 1980s were socialized into a culture of war, due to the Iran-Iraq war. War, fear, and struggle were instilled in them from a very young age. Every Thursday, Baghdad’s school students would dress in a shade of blue and turn to face the Iraqi flag as a soldier walked in from the distance with a gun. When I asked the older generations about school classes on wataniya and qawmiya, they dismissed them as mindless classes and did not have much recollection of them besides being basic classes that taught conceptions and theories related to nationalism. Yet those who attended classes after the Ba`ath seized control related different stories:

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We had a class called *wataniya* from elementary school until the first year of college. This was part of the whole state propaganda. All of the students knew that this was propaganda, so it wasn’t very formative for who we were. We read it as a Ba’ath agenda and as history according to the Ba’ath. We learned to perform what the state wants to hear and what the Ba’ath want to hear. When we wrote essays, we wrote what they wanted us to think and we were very conscious. But at home in our private sphere, we hated this and cried over these classes. We agonized over them. We Iraqis were socialized to disconnect from the Ba’ath agenda but to perform it outside in the public sphere and at school.295

These classes disassociated many of them from the state agenda but not from one another. Referring to these classes, Zein said: “The essence of these classes was not about Iraq. They were about the achievements and heroic acts of Saddam. Iraq became Saddam, and Saddam became Iraq. But we knew that our Iraq was at home and with our family and friends.”296 Creating the meaning of Iraqi identity came in different respects. The private sphere at home was one of family bonds and economic comfort, social clubs and events. Yet in the public sphere, it was operating and formulated in a different way.

Those whose formative years occurred during the 1980s saw the Iraqi nation, nationalism, and identity constructed through the Iran-Iraq war, which created a rhetoric that was part of the propaganda of Iraqi nationalism. Many internalized Iraqi-ness during this period. Such feeling, however, was manifested by support for the army and the country’s future, not for Saddam or the Ba’ath. Being Iraqi became an everyday experience by living through and experiencing the war and by watching television. This vague propaganda created a feeling of Iraqi-ness.

296 Zein [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 7 December 2007.
What is fascinating is that this younger generation similarly creates the “Real Iraq” in the same light through the rosy picture created by their parents and by their perception of and interactions with Iraqi society when they were in Iraq. They similarly feel a responsibility to transmit this image while they are in the diaspora, and so do not connect with present-day Iraq. Although they grew up in difficult times, they have adopted and believe the image their parents created for them of the “Real Iraq.” They do not belittle the hardships they faced during the Ba’ath rule; however, they argue that at least there was safety, security, stability, unity, and no communal violence. The unity that they similarly perceived and grew up with is what maintains the “Real Iraq” in their memories.

Chapter 5 presents the other side of the interviewees’ diasporic condition, that of *diasporic disenchantment*. While the past allows them to be enchanted, the present does the opposite by making them disenchanted. Consequently, their disenchantment is the reason for their enchantment and their need to create a glorified past. The current situation in Iraq has led many of these interviewees to be disconnected from the state, and to therefore be inactive in working towards its development and prosperity. In addition, while identifying themselves as “Iraqis” many of these interviewees have formulated new refuge identities that provide them a sense of stability and comfort when the fate of their country of origin’s future is left uncertain.
Chapter 5: Diasporic Disenchantment: Refuge Identities

If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or “narrative of the self” about ourselves. The fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily.

— Stuart Hall

Chapter Summary: Although the interviewees are diasporically enchanted by their pasts, they are simultaneously disenchanted by the present. They therefore take no part in any homeland activity, have no plan to return and/or visit Iraq, and rely on their refuge identities, as they do not relate to the current Iraqi state. To many of the interviewees, the “Real Iraq” remains in their self-narratives, while simultaneously speaking of diasporic refuge identities that provide them a sense of stability and security. This chapter explores the various modes of identification narrated in their interviews.

5.1 Becoming a Diasporic Iraqi

The Iraqis I spoke with did not arrive in the United States in massive numbers and until now they are one of the smaller Arab communities in the country. Consequently, they came alone or with their families, and many of them did not plan to stay here permanently. Those diasporists who arrived as individuals prioritized settling down and establishing themselves. Some found it quite easy to become accustomed to American culture and lifestyle, while others tried to resist becoming “Americanized” or having their children develop an “American way of life.” Ultimately, there were differences between those who came with families and those who came as individuals (mostly for educational purposes). Those who came independently were in a further stage of their journey and wanted to discover something new and different; thus, it was not necessarily an issue or a concern that they were from Iraq. In other words, questions of identity and fitting in did

298 The next several years may change this demographic, depending upon American refugee laws directed toward Iraqis.
not arise. Essentially, many of them did not see any contradiction between being Iraqi and living in the United States. Marwan said growing up in Iraq taught him to be ready to leave it and live in a developed country like the United States.\textsuperscript{299} For many of the migrants/immigrants, as the situation at home continually deteriorated, hopes of returning to Iraq lessened. Some who finished their higher education in the United States returned for some time, but ended up leaving again to join their children who are now working and established in the DC-Metropolitan area.

Upon coming to this country, many of the interviewees said that they did not really have much of an identity crisis. Certainly some attempted to hold on to their Iraqi way of life more than others; however, they did not find it difficult to be an Iraqi living in an American setting. In the beginning, they were trying to settle down and establish themselves financially. As they became more established and especially as they had children, making Iraqi friends and sustaining Iraqi culture became more of an issue. Over time, they kept particular elements of their past and fused them with new elements of being in the diaspora. Their time in the United States, as well as their experiences and involvement with their communities and neighborhoods, influence how they see themselves as Iraqi immigrants in the area.

At this juncture, they were selectively picking and choosing what “Iraqi” elements they would retain. They separated themselves from the state, as they were strongly opposed to Saddam’s government, but were still strongly connected to its culture and

\textsuperscript{299} Marwan [pseud.], interview conducted in Arabic by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 10 December 2007.
their memories. Their friendships, which are based around an Iraqi network and community, are indicative of this. Their involvement with Iraq was minimal to null, as there was almost nothing they could do. Many were scared for their lives as well as their family’s lives in Iraq.

5.2 Diasporic disenchantment

Regardless of the various modes of displaying diasporic enchantment and homeland connection, there are contradictions in the diasporic condition of the Iraqis who I interviewed. More than the inconsistencies arising between interviewees, the contradictions within the individual shed light on Iraqi diasporism. While there are sentimental and cultural connections to the homeland, there is very minimal tangible evidence that displays what the Iraqis claim to be feeling. In fact, their own narratives contain contradictions between their feelings and their actions. While they engage in passionate discussions about Iraq’s fate, past, present, and future, they do not have any active measures to realize their envisaged future Iraq. In other words, they are not a community of mobilization, even though a couple of individuals are active independently. In respect to my interviewee sample and the larger community they are a part of in the DC-metropolitan area, there is no Iraqi-American lobby group, existing Iraqi organizations are minimal, and those that do exist have had no effective or lasting impact on their homeland, as opposed to their Armenian and Jewish counterparts.\textsuperscript{300} They are only active to the extent that they are psychologically connected to Iraq and forge

\textsuperscript{300} Certainly there are individuals and groups such as the Iraqi National Congress that have had a lasting impact on Iraq, as can be seen with some members of the Iraqi exile community’s influence on the lead up to the 2003 Iraq war.
their friendships around this part of their life, which still rules their day-to-day existence. Their community revolves around a network of friendships of convenience with people who understand their culture, language, food, and mannerisms. Minimal explanations of particular cultural particularities are necessitated, and it is easier for them to befriend one another than an American who does not speak the Iraqi dialect or another non-Iraqi Arab who is not as engaged in Iraqi culture, history, and politics. Interestingly, many Iraqis who are and identify themselves with being more American than Iraqi still emphasize the importance and comfort of having Iraqi friends.

Such inactivity can be explained by looking at Anderson’s “imagined communities” model in an inverse direction. In his discussion, the creation of the state led to the creation of the imagined nation. Many of the interviewees stated that the Iraqi state has been non-existent in their lives for several decades – it existed but they attached very little value to it – for several reasons: (1) many left it due to their disillusionment with the political situation after Saddam took over, (2) they rarely, if at all, visited after they left, (3) the years of wars and sanctions created a situation with which they could not identify, and (4) they created their own Iraqi diasporic identity based on what they chose to retain. All of the interviewees were part of the various waves of people that left after the Ba`ath took over in 1968, many of them after Saddam assumed power in 1978. Some could not see themselves advancing in Iraq, while others came back to serve but found themselves in dangerous situations vis-à-vis the government. Even though there was an emotional link, the state drove away many of the interviewees who had the money to leave. Thus, Iraq has not been a state for the people, but rather a state for the Ba`ath regime.
To many of the interviewees, the state apparatus revolved around the Ba’ath government that ruled only for its continual survival and ego, not for the state or its community. They did not feel that the state existed to protect them or create and foster an environment for their individual and societal development, but to hamper their future. Furthermore, rather than forging a unified nation, Saddam sowed seeds of conflict in order to retain and maintain rule of the country. The ensuing ethnic and sectarian divisions, at least on a political level, manifested themselves on a social level after the 2003 Iraq war. To the world, Iraq was equated with Saddam Hussein, a link with which very few Iraqis wanted to be associated. According to some of the interviewees, the state, a highly politicized notion, became affiliated with the Saddam government and thus was not a point of reference for many Iraqis. As the government’s actions and repression increased, the nation became distant and disconnected from the state.

The occupation and violence that ensued after the 2003 Iraq war further distanced Iraqis from the state and solidified this stateless nation. Wiam said: “After the 2003 Iraq war, there was no country that I can identify with. I do not think of Iraq as a country I can identify with in any means.”301 Regardless of their initial disgust with the Ba’ath and their feelings about the American invasion and occupation of 2003, some of the interviewees wanted to help rebuild their country [this does not refer to those who aligned themselves with the American government]. But the violence soon numbed their sense of moral obligation toward the future of Iraq and they disassociated themselves even further.

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from the state. Since they do not feel connected to today’s Iraq, there is little desire to work for its sake, an attitude that explains their current diasporic disenchantment. The interviewees were connected to their families, neighborhoods, friends, education, and Iraq’s cultural, geographic, and historical elements. Many of the people whom I interviewed say that there is no longer a state, but rather a nation, and for their personal narratives only the diaporic nation exists. The nation exists through their memories of the “Real Iraq,” one that celebrates the unity of the monarchy period and even, more generally, pre-Ba’thi Iraq. Currently, their fantasy of those years and their memories form the only “homeland” with which they are affiliated. Today’s Iraq is not a state, land, or locale with which they can identify.

Such an attitude explains the second part of the two-pronged process that I introduced in this thesis. The parenthesized (dis) in diasporic (dis)enchantment is symbolic of a people who have become disillusioned and disconnected with their homeland’s politics and see little hope for being able to help it. During the prime age of the older interviewees, throughout the 1970s until 2003, they were unable to engage in any sort of positive and healthy development of their country. Saddam’s iron fist, futile wars, and the eventual sanctions made Iraq not only inaccessible to the world, but also to the Iraqis themselves. Any attempted political uprising was quickly crushed, and the consequences were grave for the participants. Some of those who worked from the outside assisted in the lead up to the 2003 Iraq war. Hope was restored in 2003, as to many Iraqis the state was revived for a short while and opportunities to become involved in its re-construction were available. However, the situation only seemed to lower peoples’ hopes, and the
cycle of violence and array of vicious and unprecedented crimes ushered in a new language that validated a form of official disconnect from the Iraqi state. More directly, the interviewees claim that they have absolutely no connection to the ongoing actions in Iraq now, the state itself, and the people back home who are committing them. Rather, the diaspores I spoke with claim to represent the “Real Iraqis” and the “Real Iraq.”

Whereas the lack of activism before was due to Saddam’s regime, Iraqi diaspores today feel that they have no state or cause toward which they can work. Their disenchantment comes from their perception that an Iraqi state does not exist. When questioned on his lack of willingness to do something creative, Omar drew a distinction among the Iraqis, Palestinians, and Israelis,

Look, Israelis … or actually Jews in general they work hard, they work very hard … and make lots of money … but why? Because they have a state and a state that is strong and is growing stronger, and they have a cause – a cause to continue this state no matter what. The Palestinians have an even stronger cause – their land and their human- and God-given rights were taken from them. They work hard, and they are getting there. They are smart – they will be able to produce something good. Now let’s look at the Iraqis. What on earth do the Iraqis have to work towards? To Saddam? Of course not! Aslan (in any regards), that time is over. Ok for al-Maliki and Talabani – the idiot puppets of the Americans? Of course not. For Iraq – what Iraq? What is Iraq? What am I going to build a lobby group for – to lobby who, to lobby what, to do what? I don’t even know how to begin thinking what to do for Iraq. It is impossible.302

Iraqi diaspores have lost hope that they have a homeland to return to, and therefore feel that there is no necessity to work for one. Their diasporic state has created a fantasy homeland: the “Real Iraq.” Considering Collins’ notion of popular memory and taking

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302 Omar [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 1 March 2008. The italics at the end are Omar’s.
their memories as authentic truth, their creation of the “Real Iraq” is also indicative of their helplessness and the absence of a homeland with which they can identify.

5.3 Diasporic Refuge Identities

For a majority of my interviewees, identifying with the “Real Iraq” is not enough for them and does not provide a sense of stability or belonging. For the most part, it sustains the cultural elements they have brought with them from their place of birth. For now they can only project their “Real Iraq” to the future in hopes that it will materialize. Currently, they take those homeland elements that are closest to them and merge them with other identities to form diasporic refuge identities that are influenced by their pasts, living in the diaspora, and the present reality in Iraq. The “Real Iraq” informs the Iraqi part of their identity and connection to Iraq. Their diasporic disenchantment becomes a reason for the need to create these new forms of identities. For the majority, refuge identities have a practical purpose: they seem more stable and promising than what their Iraqi connection may provide them. These diasporists create a new community that is guided through their conception and fantasy of what Iraq is, while maintaining day-to-day identities that represent their new place and experiences.

My research found three modes of self-identity: (1) a small segment that identifies with their sectarian or ethnic identity (mostly ethnic identity), (2) non-state identities, and (3) a majority that identifies with being a hyphenated American, mostly Iraqi-American, arguing that they identify not with post-2003 Iraq, but with Iraq as a place of birth. Those who still hold Iraqi citizenship or came to the United States when they were older speak of themselves as Iraqi.
Various elements play a role in how these interviewees identify themselves – some are general to all of them, while others are specific to one or some individuals. These factors are:

- Social class (when they were in Iraq and today)
- Level of education
- Level of religiosity
- Age/Generation
- Length of time in the United States
- Political background
- Opinion of the 2003 Iraq war
- The current situation.

As already established in the first chapter, most if not all of the interviewees come from the middle to upper classes and have obtained advanced degrees in Iraq or a Western country.

5.4 Sect and Ethnic Identities

Within the context of this section, identity can be categorized into two parts: sect and ethnicity.\(^{303}\) Whereas many of the interviewees chose various modes of identification, none of the Muslims or Christians mentioned their sect as a primary mode of identification, even though for some of them it was an important element of their identity. The Arab/Kurdish Muslim and Christian interviewees identified across other lines, which are discussed below. Some individuals identified with their ethnicity, while some minority individuals who have felt victimized identified with their religion.

An important point must be made here. The sectarian narrative has singled out three communities in Iraq: the Sunna, Shi’á, and Kurds. This is an inaccurate description, as

\(^{303}\) Notice that I did not write sect and/or ethnicity, as none of the interviewees identified in this fashion.
there are not only Shi’a and Sunni Kurds, but an array of other religions and ethnicities in Iraqi society. This misrepresentation deprives Iraqi society of its historic diversity and ancient indigenous communities (that can only be found in Iraq, such as the Shabak.) Unfortunately, I was not able to speak to all of these various groups, as they are not all available in my area of research.

5.4.1 Sect

Despite the clamor about sectarian fighting, many of the interviewees do not identify with their sect; in fact, many of them would not mark their sect on the questionnaire and wrote “N/A” or made a comment similar to Tamara’s: “I do not believe in sect. I believe in one unified religion. This does not matter and it has never mattered to us in Iraq.”304 Others said that it is part of their identity and daily practice, but it is not their primary means of identifying themselves. Ra’id said: “If someone asks me what is your background, I would answer Iraqi, not Shi’i.”305 Still others said that their sect does not matter, but would make comments throughout the interview that portrayed a different picture. This does not necessarily mean that their sect is their primary means of identification, but that it does play and has been playing more of an important role in their lives. Few of the interviewees stated outright that they are Sunni, Shi’i, or Christian. If they did indicate it, they would do so on the background questionnaire in the slot that asked for “Sect if applicable.” Alternatively, if individuals were giving examples from their lives, their family background would almost certainly come up. However, some

304 Tamara [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Washington, DC, 12 December 2007.
individuals from small minorities were more inclined to identify with their religion, such as Uri (Jewish) and Dakho (Yazidi).

As mentioned in the introduction, the interviewees’ levels of religiosity and sectarian sentiment can be divided into four categories: (1) religious and sectarian, (2) religious and non-sectarian, (3) secular and sectarian, and (4) secular and non-sectarian. Many have developed their own interpretations of religion as a vertical relationship with God (not a horizontal one with society); others have become disenchanted with it due to its use, or rather misuse, in the ongoing violence. This indicates that a collective reasoning is happening in this community and a realization that religion has become divisive in their current circumstances. The Iraq they remember is linked to a secular society that did not emphasize religious differences, but rather celebrated ethnic and religious plurality. Many spoke of days where it was normal for women to walk in miniskirts in the street or days when men used to go to the bar with friends. They explained that there was never a chance for extremism to grow, for even those who were religious kept their religion to themselves.

In most interviews with my Muslim interviewees, levels of religiosity did not equate to levels of sectarian feeling. Those who labeled themselves “religious” or “practicing” were attached to their sect on the basis of their strong belief in its ageeda (creed), not because they chose to oppose the other sect. More specifically, no one claimed that one

306 This was especially the case with the Muslim interviewees, as my Christian interviewees were not speaking in terms of sect. Within the sectarian narrative, in fact, Christians have been referred to as one group, despite the fact that several Christian communities exist in Iraq. The difference in sect has been discussed in terms of the Muslims; the Christian community has been set apart as targeted by the Muslim extremists in the country.
sect had more legitimacy than the other. Furthermore, many of those interviewed who do carry sectarian feelings do not practice religion regularly, but rather use their sect as a political affiliation and statement of what the future of Iraq should look like. Opinion on the war became more of an issue with confessional identity as people wanted to defend their sect. The sectarian narrative was not necessarily opposed by all of my interviewees. Some believed in its validity and consequently placed their confessional identity as a reason to support it, so that their community would have a part in the Iraqi government. Peoples’ levels of religiosity were not affected after the war; however, their affiliation to their sect, and for some their religion, was impacted. For example Mariana, a Chaldean Christian, does not believe in God or ascribe to any religious faith for that matter. However, she said that after the war she did not become more religious, but at times she was inclined to say that she is Christian, as she did not want to be associated with what she believes is “the violence that fundamentalist Islamist groups are perpetuating in Iraq.”

Many of the interviewees strongly reject the notion of “sect.” Others, whether they primarily identified with it or not, are more cognizant of it mainly for two reasons: (1) to defend their sect or religion, which they feel is being misrepresented, or (2) to encourage representation of their sect or religion in Iraq’s Parliament. When I asked whether confessional identity has a part of his self-narrative, Ali responded:

To some extent, the truth, yes, my confessional identity did become more important after the 2003 Iraq war. When you see that the terrorists are targeting the Shi`a, this makes me more attached to being Shi`a and to defend it against

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extremists. I have a duty to defend the sect. I am still Iraqi, but because of the attack on my sect, I am protective of it. I am not more loyal to my sect than to being Iraqi. It has nothing to do with that. It doesn’t matter. I can be Muslim and American, just like I can be Shi‘i and Iraqi.308

Yet for those who did eventually consider their confessional identity as a marker of difference, it was always due to a political development rather than a consequence of communal discord or strife. As a result, they became aware of this identity as they got older and encountered the harder elements of living in Iraq – and away from the innocence of childhood. For example, Salwan said that in her city in al-Nassiriya, she never realized the difference of being a Shi‘a woman, although her neighborhood was mixed.309 In 1990 as a newly wed, her husband Hasan took part in the uprising against Saddam, which resulted from the American invasion of Iraq after Iraq invaded Kuwait. Many of the oppositionists who participated in this event feared for their lives and escaped. Scared for their lives, Salwan and Hasan eventually ended up in the Rafha refugee camp in Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, at this point Salwan realized that being a Shi‘a could be a possible point of contention:

For me, I never felt that there was a difference between Sunni and Shi‘a in Iraq. But when I went to Saudi Arabia, I lived in the Rafha refugee camp. One day one of the Saudi television channels mentioned something about brothers from Iraq. At that point a conversation between Sunni and Shi‘a came up. I of course knew there was a doctrinal difference, but I didn’t think it was that big of a deal. They told me that some people consider the Shi‘a as Kuffar310 in Saudi. At that point, I realized that people felt that there were differences between us. We never felt that this was an issue in Iraq. We commemorated Muharram together and our non-Shi‘a neighbors ate from our qeema. Isn’t it funny that they say that in Iraq

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309 Salwan [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, handwritten interview with entire family present, Virginia, 7 January 2008.
310 Arabic for “nonbelievers.”
we have always been divided, but I did not even learn that there is an issue between Sunna and Shi’a till I was in Saudi Arabia.\footnote{Salwan [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhaire, handwritten interview with entire family present, Virginia, 7 January 2008.}

She does not believe that being Shi’i and being Iraqi are mutually exclusive. Salwan is a deeply religious woman whose family strongly adheres to the Shi’a doctrine. However, she never felt that this was a threat to her until she was in another country. Certainly this is not always the case, as there are Shi’a who strongly believe that they were oppressed on all levels in Iraq. Ban says that people always got along, even though the government made it very difficult for the Shi’a to practice their faith.\footnote{Ban [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhaire, handwritten interview conducted with her and her husband Mu’taz [pseud.], Virginia, 29 December 2007.} Mu’taz’s statement that Shi’a doctrine was not taught in school angered him personally, because he felt that no effort was ever made to respect the Shi’i.\footnote{Mu’taz [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhaire, handwritten interview conducted with him and his wife Ban, Virginia, 29 December 2007.} However, how they discuss these issues needs further analysis. Everything Mu’taz says that shows him to be sectarian is countered through his actions. He married a Sunni, and all of his friends are a mix of Sunna, Kurds, and Christians. Furthermore, his sister married a Sunni and this was never a problem. Interestingly, whereas Salwan comes from a primarily Shi’a town and Mu’taz from a mixed area of Baghdad, their conception of their Shi’a connection varies.

Salwan is more attached to her sect as a religious guidance in which she believes and seeks to teach her children. Her tie to being Shi’a is not affiliated to being Iraqi or American, which are her country of birth and citizenship, respectively. She has no political aspirations based on sect. Mu’taz holds the cultural elements of his sect close to
his heart; however, he focuses more on how the Shi`a of Iraq need to have a bigger role in the state, whether it is the government or in education. His focus is not so much on the religious side of things but on the representation of the Shi`a as being Iraq’s majority community.

5.4.2 Ethnicity

Some interviewees affiliated themselves with their ethnicity: Arab or Kurdish. Those who label themselves Arab view themselves as part of a larger community that shares the same concerns as members of an Arab diasporic community in the United States. Sharing the same language and culture, they believe that they focus on the same issues: child rearing in a non-Arab culture, Arab representation in the United States, such political issues as Palestine or Iraq, and maintaining an “authentic Arab culture” while living *bil ghurba*. They argue that Arab culture is essentially the same and that differences between Iraqi, Lebanese, or Syrian become blurry when living in the diaspora. Some believe that as their children grow up, intermarriage will increase among the different Arab communities and thus bring about a unified Arab model community that has yet to exist in the Arab world. This does not necessarily mean that they relinquish their Iraqi past or their image of the “Real Iraq”; rather, they insert it and integrate it within the larger Arab community. Their primary network of friends remains Iraqi, but there is more mixing with non-Iraqis as well. Rayanne said:

> Even in Iraq I felt that I was part of a larger Arab nation. Here we have to consider ourselves Arabs, because we are a minority in a non-Arab country.

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314 Arabic for “in the diaspora.”
And if we consider ourselves Iraqis we would be even less of a minority.\footnote{Rayanne [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Washington, DC, 17 January 2008.}

Most of my interviewees who self-identified as Arab, received permanent American residence either through a green card or American citizenship when they became adults.\footnote{In fact, all but seven of my interviewees do not have citizenship. Amir’s situation was addressed above, others have diplomatic status, and the rest have unique visa cases.} They feel that it makes sense to identify as Arab, because this is how they have always identified themselves. Identifying with their Arab ethnicity is based on finding a common and comfortable way of living here. Rayanne continues: “We are lucky to have a large Arab community in the Washington, DC area. We can work and make good money and still keep our language and culture.”\footnote{Rayanne [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Washington, DC, 17 January 2008.}

Some of the Kurdish interviewees divided themselves along two lines: (1) those who identified with Kurdish-ness as purely an ethnicity and Iraqi as a nationality that they once had or still hold on to, and (2) those who identify as Kurdish without having any affiliation with Iraq, as represented by Zhala. Zhala opposed the Saddam Hussein government and what it had done to the Kurds to the extent that she connects it to Iraq as a whole and does not identify with the people. She said: “I identify more with non-Iraqi Kurds than with Iraqi Arabs themselves.”\footnote{Zhala [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 17 January 2008.} She has maintained her friendship with her Iraqi Arab friends, and will not refrain from making friends with them. She says that many of the Kurds she has met in her area are new and still establishing themselves.

Despite her level of comfort with the Kurds, whose political views are similar to her own, Zhala feels that it is easier to meet Arabs who she feels may come from her social class.
and have the same educational level as she does. Now that the war has happened and the Kurds are gaining more authority and autonomy in the north and advancing more than the Arab cities, she feels herself becoming more connected to her Kurdish identity. She believes that she needs to take part in various activities to engage in the Kurdish struggle for independence and nationhood, and so works toward this end.

5.4.3 Conflictual Identities: Minorities

For minority groups, holding on to a confessional identity can be described in two ways: (1) those who do not see that their minority identity and Iraqi nationality have to be mutually exclusive, and (2) those who feel that they are victims of mistreatment due to their religion or ethnicity, which makes them hold on to their minority status even more. I was fortunate enough to interview a Yazidi family in Northern Virginia who said that they were one of three families in the area. They are interesting, as they are both a religious (Yazidi) and an ethnic (Kurdish) minority. They identify as Yazidis primarily because it is their religion and they follow the community’s specific cultural and religious rules and traditions. As it is one of the smaller communities, as well as an exclusionary one, they assume responsibility for maintaining its presence. They came to the United States very recently as refugees. The father, Dakho, and his sons have assimilated into American society more on a technical level than on an emotional level. In other words, they work and study here, but across the board, the parents and children refuse to adopt American culture. The mother, who does not speak any English, told me that there is little reason for her to do so because she refuses to become part of American society. According to their description of their religion neither men nor women are allowed to
marry non-Yazidis. Their sons plan on returning to their village in Iraq to marry there. Furthermore, as Kurds they hope for the creation of a Kurdish state in which they can live. They believe that they will be better able to live in more peace and be more accepted in a Kurdish state, even if their religion differs from the majority of Kurds.

According to Zein, whose family is Iraqi-Armenian, the two identities do not have to be mutually exclusive. He is twice in the diaspora: his family moved to Iraq before he was born and then he moved to the United States with his own immediate family. He says they have always considered themselves Iraqi first and foremost, and their Armenian identity is very much attached to their Christian Orthodox religion, which, as a practicing family, they strongly identify with. He explains that Armenian history, and specifically the Armenian genocide, plays a significant role in their lives. Zein and his family enjoyed living in Iraq, for they believe that they were able to maintain their cultural practices and religion while also being Iraqi citizens and nationals. He feels that this is not necessarily the case for all Armenians in the diaspora. According to Melissa Bilal, cultural practices are indispensable to protecting and reproducing Armenian identity. Because the Armenian genocide still plays a fundamental role in their nation’s memory, anything that leads to threatening Armenian identity is severely forbidden.319

Based on Zein’s experience and narration of Iraq, his family’s experience as Armenians living there fundamentally differed from those Armenians living in Turkey. Bilal observes that for many decades, Armenian Turks could not express their cultural

heritage because of Ankara’s restrictions on different ethnic groups. Turkish national culture was formulated through the local and dominant heritage and the cultural denial of Armenians and other ethnicities in the nationalized territory. Consequently, Armenians and others were encapsulated into identities that served to locate them outside of the Turkish national identity.\textsuperscript{320} To Zein, this was never the case in Iraq. For example, although it is undesirable to marry a non-Armenian, his marriage to a Catholic Iraqi-Assyrian girl was not a problem for the family. Zein does not feel that he was treated any differently growing up because he was Christian. In fact, none of my Christian interviewees expressed any negative experiences in Iraq. Samir said that there were some instances of discrimination, but that they were minimal and nothing significant. “Christians could do the same things that Muslims did,”\textsuperscript{321} Samir said.\textsuperscript{322} Although generations apart, Zein (twenty-nine years old) and Samir (sixty-three years old) come from educated families and lived in high society.

But Uri, a practicing Jew who also came from a well-off family, did not see things the same way as Samir and Zein, for he had different considerations. Even though his parents were socially involved in the Iraqi community, he grew up mostly around Iraqi Jews. Although his parents had non-Jewish Iraqi friends, he felt that they were looked down upon, especially after the creation of Israel: “I felt that people never could trust us just because we are Jewish. Before Israel, Jews were probably more accepted in Iraq.”\textsuperscript{323}

\textsuperscript{320} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{321} Samir [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Maryland, 22 January 2008.
\textsuperscript{322} I realize that minority issues are a sensitive topic. Here, I would like to repeat that these views solely belong to my interviewees and are not meant to represent the overall sentiment of any one community.
\textsuperscript{323} Uri [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Washington, DC, 3 January 2007.
Throughout his life he attended a Jewish school and seminary in Baghdad, and his social network was created around the Iraqi Jewish community. He felt that his family’s religion was a fundamental component of his identity and thus it was harder to mingle with non-Jews his age. While he was preparing for his Bar Mitzvah, “others were playing in the neighborhood streets,” for example. Yet his identity is informed by the Arab-Israeli conflict. He was born in 1949, one year after the creation of Israel. Since he was young, his parents spoke to him about Israel and supported its creation. As a youth, he differed from some of his Jewish friends who did not have the same viewpoints as he and his family on Israel. Those Jews, Uri said, primarily identified with an Iraqi identity more than a Jewish or an Israeli connection. As tension grew between the Arab world and Israel, Uri internalized this conflict and created a strong Jewish identity. He eventually immigrated to Israel to serve in the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces). Samir, one of my interviewees, describes his situation as one of “conflictual identity”:

Identities that grow in the middle of conflict – they begin to define themselves in the context of that conflict. This creates an abstraction of contradictions, like Sunni and Shi’a. The essence of conflictual identity is that a person bases identity on a conflict with something else, and they do not place a great value on history, friends, and society. Every identity has pluses and minuses.

As mentioned above, while a select number of the interviewees do identify with a confessional identity, most of the interviewees do not. The other modes and layers of identification are further explored below.

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324 Ibid.
325 Samir [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Maryland, 22 January 2008.
326 Ibid.
5.5 Non-state Identities

Some of the interviewees did not choose to identify with any state entity. I divided these into three categories: world citizen, nomad and Mesopotamian.

5.5.1 World Citizen

The most expressive display of disillusionment with the Iraqi situation is of those who label themselves as “world citizens” rather than affiliating themselves with any country. Leena, who is sixty-five years old, came to the United States in 1984 after her husband was threatened in Iraq for being anti-Saddam. She considers herself to be an atheist, although her family is Muslim. Leena feels that she is going through an identity crisis:

I am a concerned human being. I am concerned about the good in people and how we should help each other, and I am very conscious about the future of humanity. I will not label myself as an Iraqi or as an American – not now at least. I am a citizen of the world.327

Leena relates that she started questioning her identity only recently, as the violence erupted in Iraq. In the beginning, she was still emotionally tied to Iraq:

The older you get, the more you want to go back to your roots. But I thought about my kids, and they have to succeed. The older I get, the more I miss the old days. I am not thinking of going back. People changed. They are not the people I knew. This is not the “Real Iraq.” In the name of religion, people changed. When my husband went to Iraq in 2004, he said that the people changed so much, even his friends and relatives. Their attitude changed so much. They do not have the same akhlaq328 as before … I am sure there are still some good people left.329

Although emotionally connected to her country, Leena saw living in the United States as a necessity, especially for her children’s future. She does not relinquish her Iraqi

328 Arabic for “manners.”
identity, but draws upon the image of the “Real Iraq” and compares what she knew to what is taking place today. However, the war made her question her connection to Iraq. Her family is mixed along sectarian and ethnic lines, but she was never exposed to the types of problems that are occurring today. She says that if her family were living in Baghdad today, its members would feel totally out of place as they are secular, educated, open-minded, and staunchly against religious fundamentalism. It is not only Iraq that she feels unable to relate to; she feels that she cannot relate to the United States either. Although her immediate family is in the US and she is comfortable, she feels like an alien here because she looks different and feels that she is treated differently as well:

I do not feel American. I don’t know they wouldn’t let us feel this way. Maybe it is because of the way I look or my accent. Maybe common sense says that I am Iraqi-American, since I was born and raised in Iraq and now live in the States, but I am not really – I am not committed to either. We will never really be considered real Americans or Iraqis.  

Therefore, in her view, the best way to reconcile this feeling of disconnect is to speak of herself as a world citizen. Leena never defines this term; however, she feels that it is the safest way to identify herself. In a way, she believes that a country, whether it is Iraq or the United States, has the primary responsibility of keeping its people connected to it and therefore forging their identity around it. According to her, how a country makes you feel included or excluded is what makes you that much more Iraqi or American, not the number of years or the family that binds you to it.

Leena is not making a statement about economic comfort, but rather about larger notions of a country’s duty to its people and what ties a nation together: unity and peace.

330 Ibid.
Although she finds comfort in making friends within the Iraqi community, she similarly finds comfort in making friends from all over the world who share her perspective and also view religion as a divisive (rather than a unifying) force. Since the 2003 Iraq war, she has found it difficult to maintain her friendships with many of the Iraqis she knows, as she believes that issues that never came up before, such as the current sectarianism discourse make her extremely uncomfortable. She also feels that her American friends are continuously asking, although innocently, about these sectarian problems, which also makes her uncomfortable:

All of a sudden, something that was never an issue in my life has become the biggest topic of conversation. Leave me be from this nonsense. It is much easier to connect with people on meaningful issues. You see, if I call myself a world citizen no one has to ask me about the specifics of my background, [because] I belong to the world like everyone else. I know that sounds idealistic.

5.5.2 Iraqi Nomad

Another sub-variation of these non-state identities is that of the “Iraqi nomad” offered by Amir. His narrative provides an intriguing and noteworthy perspective on current global migratory trends and what they signify for the moving individual. Amir, a medical doctor, left Iraq at the age of twenty-five in 1998 and went to Cairo to join his family, who had escaped the unbearable situation brought about by the sanctions. After completing his M.A. in Cairo, he went to the United States to complete his Ph.D. After finishing course work, he conducted fieldwork for one year in Paris. Upon returning to the United States to write his dissertation, he was denied entry as the country did not accept his old Iraqi passport. He then had to move to Canada to obtain some form of legal

331 Ibid.
332 Amir [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, international telephone conversation, 27 December 2007.
residence. Due to what he calls the “frustration and humiliation” of continuously moving around, he identified himself as an Iraqi nomad:

I believe in a certain form of nomadism in life, and I believe that people have always been moving and roaming and relate to certain territories by the fact that they were born there. And for me, that from reading history and how people moved all around and how people settled in areas and moved around and shifted places all around. I have tried to reconcile my identity through this way. Even though I left Iraq, the place where I was born and raised in, this is part of the story of history, people move around and create histories and new identities. In this sense I am an Iraqi nomad. I am Iraqi in the sense that I grew up there, the language, the cultural aspects. I have my own sentiments to the place I grew up in and the country I relate to.333

Amir’s outlook, while realistic and quite sophisticated on several levels, also indicates a certain tragic acceptance of the inability to return to Iraq, of living without a legal form of citizenship, and of being in limbo between political borders. The continuous struggle of getting in and out of a country’s borders became tiring, and so instead of being attached to one place, it is much simpler to attach himself to the idea of Iraq by being a “nomad.” Although he comes from a post-Ba`ath generation and has become jaded by his parents’ rosy sketch of Iraq’s past, he has not released his memories of Iraq; rather, he has recreated it in the diaspora:

I don’t want to live in permanent nostalgia. I have a role here, as someone who is attached to Iraq as an idea or a sentiment. I have to carry this idea through my writing, through my music, through creating and presenting to the world the complexity of Iraq. I don’t want to necessarily show a rosy picture, because Iraq isn’t a rosy picture. This is how I am living my Iraqi-ness through my nomadism.334

333 Ibid.
334 Ibid.
5.5.3 Mesopotamian-ness: The Mesopotamians

Six of the interviewees chose to identify themselves as Mesopotamian. More specifically, they meant that they reject the modern-day borders created by the British in the 1920s. They believe that the inhabitants of what is today called “Iraq” have existed in this area from time immemorial. They were trading partners grouped into various communities who, despite the differences, wars, and invasions that took place, always got along with each other. Most importantly for these interviewees, the area’s civilizations and empires form their perception of a glorified history to which they can all similarly relate as Iraqis today. The achievements of those who ruled from what are today Iraqi cities are those of modern-day Iraqis’ ancestors; similar accomplishments have not been achieved in the region’s modern form. Wiam described herself as identifying with Mesopotamia, which she referred to as the key to what holds part of the “Real Iraq’s”: richness and success. She even went as far as saying that this is the Iraq she knows and has to defend:

Now I feel that I have to defend the Iraq that I know and studied in school. Not everyone was covering their head, the neighbors had such good relationships despite their background. I like Iraq in its beginning stages. Since the 1920s women were in colleges in Iraq. My uncle’s wife was a doctor during the 1930s. It used to be a free country, and I feel proud when I talk about civilizations in Iraq, like Sumeria. Mesopotamia – I feel that I am very proud of it. I come from this area, which is called Iraq, you know. But the original land is Mesopotamia, and I am from this original land – this land of success and glory.335

Without relinquishing their place of birth, Leena, Amir, and Wiam present anti-nationalist modes of identity. Both Leena and Wiam come from a similar background: highly educated, well-read and traveled, and are around the same age (sixty-three and

fifty-nine, respectively). Both left Iraq in the 1980s and have had American citizenship for several years. Amir, who is nearly half their age and left Iraq at a much younger age, does not have citizenship. However, they all have a similar worldview: religion has served as a divisive force and the state has failed in its responsibility to its people. Wiam said: “Compare the ancient accomplishments of our region to what took place after the creation of the state. There is no comparison. We have only gone down hill.” To these women, both Iraq and the United States as political entities have disappointed them. Despite their positive memories of Iraq, the government caused them to become disillusioned with it. In the United States, they have never felt included as part of the society and feel that they were never allowed to be included. Similarly, Amir, although their junior by thirty years, feels dismayed by nation-state laws and where he is allowed to live and not live.

5.6 Hyphenations

The majority of the interviewees identified as Iraqi-American; thirteen identified as Arab, Kurdish, or Muslim Americans. According to Heba Sharobeem, the main question revolving around hyphenated American identities is “what side of the hyphen a person belongs to.” Lisa S. Majaj argues that there are two ways of looking at Arab-American identity: “the first view is that Arab-American identity is in essence a

336 Ibid.
transplanted Arab identity” that seeks to preserve Arab culture, the Arabic language, and involvement and activism with Middle Eastern political issues. The second view argues that Arab-American identity is intrinsically American and should be understood within the light of American assimilation and multiculturalism. These two perspectives can conjoin; however, Majaj believes that there is always a particular orientation toward one over the other.

Keeping or replacing the “Arab” with Iraqi, Kurdish, or Muslim, these two views were represented by my interviewees. For the most part, the interviewees saw themselves as living each side of the hyphen in the public and private sphere, respectively. For some, these spheres intermingled as they are part of American institutions that deal with Middle Eastern or Muslim issues. The hyphenation is symbolic of the past and present, the past being their ethnic/homeland connection and the present representing their new identity as citizens of the United States. Regardless of the type of hyphenation with which they decide to identify, these individuals consider the United States to be their permanent home and believe that they have successfully assimilated into the American mode of life while still holding on to their heritage. They sustain the image of the homeland they have recreated in their lives, while also giving to American society (their new diasporic refuge) through their professions and receiving stability, economic success, and security in

339 Ibid.
340 Ibid.
return. Consequently, they do not necessarily have one orientation over the other, as Majaj argues, but they believe they have the best of both worlds.

5.7 Ethnic/Religious Hyphenations

Some of the interviewees identified with their ethnic or religious group and being American, for they believe it reflects the cause and/or continuous ethnic group with which they will identify in the United States.

5.7.1 Kurdish-American

To my Kurdish-American interviewees, Kurdistan remains a homeland that they wish to see become a sovereign nation-state in the future. They do not necessarily disassociate themselves from Iraq and explained that the Iraqi government played a role in creating a rift between Kurds in the north and the rest of Iraq. “After Saddam committed the crimes he did against Kurds, it became a question of survival for us, and over time it developed into other feelings that we were different from the rest,” said Samia. These individuals consider it their responsibility to represent the Kurdish voice in the diaspora and work toward an independent Kurdistan. They similarly appreciate the rights and liberties granted to them in this country, especially since they feel that they did not possess these rights in Iraq. However, they are disillusioned with Kurdish politics and the rift between some of the parties and groups in Kurdistan. While it is true that Kurds are uniting for an independent Kurdistan, they believe that political upheaval makes it difficult to live in Kurdistan. As Kurds in the diaspora, they feel that they can take advantage of their position and work for the Kurdish struggle. Samia remarked:

341 Samia [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 4 December 2007.
I love Kurdistan – its greenery and its beauty. I love the kindness and compassion people shower us with when we go. But when I went in 2006, I felt that this has all changed. I feel that the leaders in Kurdistan are corrupt and sowing problems in society. I feel that Kurds here in Virginia are more like the Kurds that I knew when I used to visit in the 1990s. In 2003, I felt more Kurdish than ever. I feel that I had an opportunity to work for Kurdistan and represent our perspective.  

5.7.2 Arab-American

Those interviewees who identified themselves as Arab come from older generations who, at one point, had a pan-Arab vision. They came to the United States when they were older and still holding on to this idea. The interviewees who identified with being Arab-American were younger, raised in the United States, or are raising young children today. However, they essentially have the same rationale for identifying themselves as the “Arab” interviewees discussed above. Those who identified as Arab-Americans feel that identifying with an Arab diasporic community gives them more strength and voice in this country than with the Iraqi diasporic community and that they can do more for the Arab world by identifying as Arab-Americans than focusing on particular nationalities. When coming to the United States, the intricacies of Lebanese or Iraqi culture become blurred into a larger Arab culture. While each community retains its cultural particularities, their similarities are stronger than their differences. The Arab-American experience is the same across all Arab nationalities. Zeena said:

After I got my American citizenship, I never said that I am Iraqi-American. I always say that I am Arab-American, because I feel that Arabs are all the same. Whatever country we are from, we are *watan al-Arabi*. The different nationalities shouldn’t matter. We are all here under the same name, Arab-Americans. Focusing on nationalities will make us weaker. 

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342 Ibid.
Identifying with being Arab-American serves as a comfort zone for those who wish to remain living here, for it allows them both to maintain their cultural background and to assimilate into the American way of life. It also indicates that these interviewees do not necessarily intend to return to Iraq, since they are focusing on creating a new identity that characterizes their new experience and how they want to live and/or raise their children.

### 5.7.3 Muslim American

In the United States, Ali has come to identify himself by his citizenship and religion and says that he is of Iraqi descent. He stated that when he was in Iraq, Islamic causes took primacy over nationalist movements, even though he wanted to serve Iraq and contribute to its development. But after the government blacklisted him, this goal became a dream because the Saddam government made it impossible for him to advance and put him under tight surveillance. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, his primary goal became to develop the Muslim community in the United States, for he thought this would open up channels to eventually help Iraq as well. In early 2003, although he was opposed to the war, he hoped that he may finally have an opportunity to help out there. The fall of Saddam’s government, however, only gave him false hopes of reconnecting with his homeland and thus reconfirmed his identity as a Muslim American. Once he could no longer renew his Iraqi passport, his American citizenship assumed new meaning for him as a place where he has been able to maximize his full potential. “Iraq,” he told me,

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344 Hyphenated identities grammatically apply only to ethnic groups. However in the context of this thesis I have included Muslim-American in this section because religion is an important element in some of my interviewees’ identities. However other religious groups did not identify with being their “religion-American,” i.e. Christian-American.

was a place of hope. I would have hoped things would be better. I wish I could have done more. It makes me so sad that I have not been able to contribute to a better-developed Iraq. The society, the social net, the extended family, friends from childhood, high school that formed me, that formed my identity, my understanding, and my connection to Islam. 346

Ali claims that he can work for the Muslim community in this country and provide Western society with a new understanding of Islam. He believes that the United States helped him achieve success and a position of influence and that his Muslim and American identities are not threatened, as his Iraqi identity is. He added that after 2003, he wished to use the experience he gained in the United States to return to Iraq and do something useful for his homeland, but that the ensuing violence and corruption have made this impossible. The dream still exists, but cannot be realized. It is safer and easier for him to remain a Muslim American, identifying with his faith and current citizenship while his homelands’ fate is unknown.

5.8 Iraqi-American

Those interviewees who identified as Iraqi-American came from various religious and ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Christian, Sunni/Shi’i Muslim, Kurd, and Arab) say that the values and traditions valued by Americans are the ones that they grew up valuing in Iraq: acquiring a good education, building a bright future, serving the country, and engaging in hard work and perseverance. For this reason, they do not believe it was difficult to become accustomed to the American lifestyle. Certainly, language was not a barrier for many, as they came with some English background through their studies in Iraq. Many

346 Ibid.
who eventually settled in this area learned of the ever-growing Iraqi community and became part of its social network.

For these individuals, their self-narratives evolved through differences in the public and private spheres. Salwan best explains this dynamic. Salwan and Hasan came here as UNHCR-sponsored refugees in the mid-1990s after living in the Saudi Rafih refugee camp for a couple of years. Hasan, a medical doctor, began volunteering and eventually worked in a Catholic non-governmental organization to establish himself financially. He heard of the opportunities in the DC-Metropolitan area and decided to move here with his wife and child. Upon arriving in Virginia, Salwan quickly became acquainted with the Iraqi community and created a network of Iraqi friends, while Hasan applied for medical positions. Salwan did not interact much outside of her Iraqi clique; however, once her children reached school age, she started to become more engaged in American society:

I wish I could live in Iraq so that I can be next to my family. I don’t care what the situation is. But the future of my kids is more promising in the United States. If I didn’t have kids, I will stay there forever. But I also do feel that this is my home. I feel American when I am intermingling with the American community outside in the schools and the system. But in my home and with my friends, I feel Iraqi. With the Iraqis, I feel that I am Iraqi.

Salwan creates a public-private dynamic that forges her hyphenated identity. In the United States, she sees her children’s future and success, but her cultural comfort zone remains around her Iraqi friends. Hasan, who says that he agrees with his wife on this point, has a broader understanding of being Iraqi and American that reflects Majaj’s

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347 Salwan [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, handwritten interview with entire family present, Virginia, 7 January 2008.
second perspective on Arab-American identity. The couple had the following discussion on identity during the interview:

**Salwan:** I feel that I am Iraqi Muslim, and then American. I feel that I am different in what I wear, my hijab, and the color of my skin. But I still benefit from and am thankful to this country. I benefit from this country and my children study here. And I am a citizen and abide by the laws.

**Hasan:** I also feel Iraqi inside and American outside.

**Salwan:** No, I feel Iraqi outside too because I look different. But I do also feel American outside because I am doing things that I would not have been doing if I was in Iraq, like going to a PTA meeting at our children’s school.

**Hasan:** No, you do not understand what the meaning of American is. American is Iraqi and Muslim. American is white, green, and black.

**Salwan:** But the way we talk, there is an accent. Because of citizenship, maybe I feel American. I miss celebrating Eid and Eid al-Sana al-Shamsiya the way we did in Iraq.

**Hasan:** Well, here they have Easter, Christmas, and Valentine's Day.

**Salwan:** These are holidays that I cannot become accustomed to.

Salwan has a stricter definition of being American as connected to citizenship and a particular gratitude toward a country that accepted her and is educating her children. Hasan presents the “melting pot” view that this country is an amalgam of different ethnicities and religions in which Americans can actualize their homeland identities while still being American. He works as a doctor in the American medical system and thus interacts more with Americans of different backgrounds; Salwan’s circle is more limited. He also believes that he functions as an Iraqi at home, but that being an American of Iraqi descent is similar to being an American of Polish, Irish, Indian, or Cuban descent. Regardless of their conception of being American, however, they both believe in creating

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348 Salwan and Hasan [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, handwritten interview with entire family present, Virginia, 7 January 2008. This is a conversation that took place between the couple during the interview.

349 Hasan [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, handwritten interview with entire family present, Virginia, 7 January 2008.

350 Ibid.
an Iraqi culture at home from which their children can learn from and grow up while continuing to focus on the American values of freedom and democracy.

In addition to the private-public dynamic, many of these interviewees produce their identities based on what they perceive as “common sense” between the legal and the cultural. Riyadh, who left Iraq in 1972 at the age of twenty-six and came to the United States, has never gone back. For him, the identity question was clear:

I am an Iraqi-American. I was born and raised in Iraq and obtained my college degree from there. Both my parents are Iraqis. And half of my life has been in the United States. I came here when I was twenty-six years old. I have been here for thirty-five years. I consider it my home. I have been in the US longer than I was in Iraq. I got citizenship, I vote, and I am involved in the community.  

The life of comfort and freedom that Riyadh has developed here is what he characterizes as being American. He claimed that living in the United States is addictive:

I was not forced to come here. I came on my own expense and by my own choice. I wanted to come for a little bit for an adventure and then go back home. But when you come here, you get addicted to working and living here. I had to think about obtaining a green card and citizenship. And then you realize it is great to live in America. Everything people want is provided here. There are rules and regulations, they tell you how to do things. It is so convenient. We do not have that in Iraq. Eventually, Saddam assumed power and my family didn’t encourage me to go back, and [so] I never did.  

Riyadh explains that he cannot just wipe out his Iraqi background, since he spent twenty-six years of his life there. He would rather stay in the United States, which he calls a place of convenience. He enjoys everything that he has here and likes the political system: “I do not always agree with the politics. Certain administrations I do, some I

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352 Ibid.
don’t. See, this is why it is nice to live here. There is freedom of speech, there is transparency in politics and bureaucracy. You have the ability to be critical of the government.” Meanwhile, Riyadh does not relinquish his Iraqi connection. In fact, other interviewees labeled him as one of the main socialites of the DC-Metropolitan Iraqi community, as he enjoys entertaining guests and organizing Iraqi nights where his friends indulge in Iraqi cuisine. Furthermore, he is up to date on Iraqi political news, ready to offer his perspectives on the current situation, and similarly spoke of the “Real Iraq” as the main component of his Iraqi identity.

Waleed, who left in 1978, has a similar attitude, but one that is even more connected to Iraq. He went back to Iraq for the first time in 2004. He would like to return in the future for long visits, but does not see himself living there after having established his life in the United States. Waleed also divides the Iraqi-American identity into two explanations:

I do feel at home in the US. I enjoy the freedoms of being an American. My citizenship is American. My passport says to me that you are American. Anywhere I go in the world, I am American. I get the benefits and the responsibilities of being an American. It is an obligation to defend the US, because I am here. Citizenship is a contract, [and] I took an oath. I swore that I would serve the US Constitution. But my culture is Iraqi. It is part of how I was raised. I was born and raised in a certain culture. My outlook on life, my language, my preferences, my sentiments, my roots – they are still there. There are strong cultural differences, and I would feel more at home in Iraq because of the food, the culture, the people, and the familiarity. Working in DC, people always look at us differently. We become conscious about our accents and who we are. In the streets of Mosul, I am not self-conscious.354

353 Ibid.
Citizenship was an important theme throughout the interviews. Being American revolves around citizenship and, therefore, a respect for the law. Since laws in Iraq were subject to the whims of the successive governments, written law, the Constitution, and even driving laws are extremely important to Iraqi diasporists. Consequently, the pledge that they made upon becoming American citizens is something that they take very seriously, for they take American law and their rights very seriously.

Iraq and the United States assume different places in the interviewees’ lives. Many of them completed their higher education here and developed a form of social responsibility and rights that they could not obtain in their own homeland. It provides them with a decent and fulfilling material life. Iraq fulfills other human needs, those of childhood memories, loved ones, family, food, language, culture, traditions, music, and heritage. For this reason, many of the interviewees celebrate their Iraqi heritage and American citizenship, for they see both cultures as representatives of great accomplishments. Omar and his wife obtained their Ph.D. degrees in the United States. He lived here from 1967-74 - he finished his degree in 1972, waited for his wife to finish hers and then they both returned to Iraq in 1974 to serve their country. As the sanctions and various wars caused the country to deteriorate, in 2000 they decided to come back to the United States:

We decided to serve our country, Iraq. We were passionate about this idea. That’s the land of our ancestors and family. But things changed after the war, and we wanted to come back to the US, because when we lived here from 1967 to 1974 we got used to everything here. When I first came in 1967, I came without a scholarship. My professor helped me, and I eventually received a full scholarship. I always felt that I was in debt to people here in the US, and I always love Iraq as my country.  

Considering himself an Iraqi-American, Omar’s identity stems from the gratitude he feels toward these two countries. He bases his American identity on the higher education he received here and the positive treatment received from his colleagues at university. Furthermore, his connection revolves around American pop culture and lifestyle and his love for American sports. His link to Iraq is that of yearning. If the situation had not deteriorated in Iraq, he believes that he would have stayed there. However, his children live in the United States and he felt that this was enough of a reason to move here. He came back when he was in his late sixties and viewed the United States as the country of his retirement and the birthplace of his grandchildren. This did not change his feelings about Iraq, however:

I always felt that Iraq will remain my country. I was born there, all my relatives are there, my childhood is there, my youth, I was married there, my children were born there … it is my history. I am still tied to Iraq … you know, but the “Real Iraq” I told you about before, not what you are seeing on TV now … Anyway, that is not even Iraq.  

Omar feels that he has lost confidence in Iraq. He initially supported the 2003 Iraq war so that Saddam could be removed and so that he could at least visit Iraq. But now this is impossible. This is indicative that for many, being American serves as a refuge identity, one that transforms into a place of certainty when Iraq provides no hope of return. In a way, even though many of them yearn to return, there is really nothing they can do about it. Thus, their only option is to stay here. Interspersed within his comments about living in this country are comments about his admiration for Iraq. These back and

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356 Ibid.
forth feelings show a form of confusion that exists within the interviewees as they attempt to reconcile who they really are.

Khalid, a non-American citizen, dismissed individuals who speak of themselves as Iraqi Americans:

The real spirit of Iraqis should be IRAQISM before anything else. This spirit should exist more amongst educated Iraqis and more in the diaspora because they have not been exposed to the traumatic reality of sectarian or ethnic violence. They have more memories of the glorious past and not the realities of the horrific present.

I explained to Khalid that those who self-identified as Iraqi-Americans did not play down or underscore their Iraqi identity, but had simply added a new mode of identification that reflects their move to this country and their reactions to the present-day situation. He disagreed, saying that these individuals are dismayed, confused, and in denial about what is taking place today. That is why, he asserted, they also speak of themselves as Americans:

People call themselves Americans for two [primary] reasons, (1) they are deeply hurt and they reject Iraqi identity. Their codes of ethics are very high; they cannot just accept what is happening now as Iraqi, and (2) they do not want to be affiliated with the criminals who are in Iraq now.

However, he believes they have no reason to identify as Americans, as the image of the “Real Iraq” should still be clear in their minds and memories, and because they are not in Iraq and so cannot really know about or be affected by its violent reality. Rather, they should maintain Iraqi unity and disregard other modes of identification that will take away the essence of what it means to be an Iraqi and the effort to maintain unity.

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357 This is Khalid’s emphasis.
359 Ibid.
However, this thesis seeks to posit that a primary reason for identifying as American is because they do know Iraq’s current reality and do not identify with it.

Khalid is correct in that the interviewees are denying today’s Iraq as a result of their hurt and disenchantment. In addition, he essentially reflects their general feelings. However, their connection to their American identity should not be undermined. Iraqis are dismayed with the current situation and, by speaking of their American identity, are exposing their inner desires and hopes for what a country should provide: safety, economic stability, and freedom. Riyadh said that although their freedoms have been disrupted after 9/11 and “freedom is not free in the US any longer,”360 at least there is a system of government accountability that they never had in Iraq. Furthermore, many of them are primarily connected to their children’s future, which gives them a reason to not return to Iraq. Their children are either still young and attending school, or are older and have established jobs and families. To these Iraqis, being Iraqi-American is a straightforward explanation: Iraqi by birth and by culture, American by citizenship and freedoms, and Iraqi-American by sharing in the values of education and success that both nations stress. They claim that today’s Iraq no longer stresses these values and that they can only be found in their new diasporic refuge for their children and future generations.

Although the majority of interviewees identified with being Iraqi-American, I choose to end with them for a reason: if we are to speak and fantasize about Iraq’s future as a nation-state, these diasporists are the ones who can contribute to its future development and success. If they speak of knowing the “Real Iraq,” then it is their responsibility to

recreate what they know. Regardless of how they identify themselves, their strong sentimental and emotional attachment to Iraq cannot be overlooked. As Iraq’s political future is unknown, it is up to the Iraqis living in Iraq, the United States, and other countries to decide their homeland’s fate. The interviewees’ diasporic refuge identities not only indicate their immigration and new life experiences, but also their overwhelming feeling of utter dismay and sadness about Iraq’s recent history and current situation. The continuing uncertainty over Iraq evokes a need to become connected to and affiliated with other identity modes for the sake of security.
Chapter 6: Conclusion-Projecting the Past toward the Future

Since 2003, news media and Western governments have presented “Iraqi” society, identity, and nation through a hegemonic sectarianism discourse that emphasizes ethnic and sectarian divisions. Ordinary Iraqis, whether inside or outside of Iraq, are rarely asked if this narrative is accurate and representative of their reality. The Iraqi diasporists I interviewed for this thesis, seventy-seven in all, narrated their identities and perceptions of what is taking place in their “homeland” today. This thesis, therefore, provides a more accurate analysis of their perceptions and thus can shed light on how Iraqi diasporists perceive the reality of themselves and their homeland.

A majority of the interviewees do not identify with post-2003 Iraq, blame the violence on external forces or groups who are not representative of the “Real Iraqis,” reject the sectarianism discourse, and tell their memories of a unified Iraqi society. Their strong reactions have created a widespread counter-narrative based upon the many similarities noted in their accounts. It is not coincidental that most of them related the same narratives, as can be seen through their identity-formations and self-narratives, both of which they have constructed on an image of the “Real Iraq.” The “Real Iraq” serves two purposes: as (1) a nostalgic image of the past they used to identify with instead of today’s Iraq, and, even more importantly, (2) as a politicized reading of their

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361 I have put “homeland” in quotation marks because the memories of the “Real Iraq” are the homeland with which they identify.

362 Here I am speaking about a majority of the interviewees, not the exceptions whom I discussed throughout the thesis.
memories and pasts that they have constructed in order to provide a corrective both to the present and to the sectarianism discourse.

The purpose of this study was not to present a static definition of “Iraqi identity,” but rather to shed light on how a particular community conceives itself by analyzing its members’ stories, memories, and self-narratives. Therefore, I sought to make and evidence three major points in order to provide a corrective to the sectarianism discourse and faulty Western analyses that have been used to “explain” Iraqi society thus far: (1) the complexity of Iraqi identity, which is particularly important because the production of knowledge related to it has been very problematic; (2) the fragility of the Iraqi diasporic condition, which I analyzed through the useful two-pronged term \textit{diasporic (dis)enchantment}; and (3) how the interviewees exist as a stateless nation – that is, their process of creating an imagined “Real Iraq” that exists only in their memories, thereby disassociating themselves from the current reality of violence and, consequently, disconnecting themselves from the state.

Based on my research, I have concluded that the majority of my interviewees have used their memories of the “Real Iraq” to freeze their past through a process of \textit{diasporic enchantment} in order to cope with the perplexing present. They have then projected this frozen past onto the future as a refuge for their identity. They have identified with present-day Iraq only twice since the 2003 Iraq war during the 2007 Iraqi Asia Cup
Victory and Shatha Hassoun’s \textsuperscript{363} victory in the Arab reality television show “Star Academy.” Many of the interviewees remarked that the unifying feelings that arose during these victories constituted the true sentiments and spirit of the “Real Iraqis.” Furthermore, it is a positive sign of hope that Iraqis would rather have a unified Iraq under one flag than a divided Iraq. When I asked about a BBC news article’s statement that the Iraqi soccer team was composed of “Sunna, Shi`a, and Kurds,” Abdullah said: “This is the media insisting on dividing us. But our victory and the celebrations from Erbil to Basra proved them wrong. We will never be divided, from north to south, the Euphrates to the Tigris. We will always be united under the Iraqi flag.”\textsuperscript{364}

However, such victories are short lived and the violent reality quickly overshadows any moments of happiness. While they strongly identify with the “Real Iraq” and these victorious moments as its present-day manifestation, the interviewees have created diasporic refuge identities in the presence of their one-time homeland filled with unprecedented civil violence and with which they feel they cannot identify. These identities provide them a sense of stability, comfort, and permanence. Consequently, the research produced three modes of self-identity in addition to identifying with the “Real Iraq”: (1) non-state identities, (2) sectarian/ethnic identities (especially ethnic identity), and (3) hyphenated identities, especially that of being an Iraqi-American. During their time in the diaspora and through their reflections on their pasts and the present-day reality, they have come to identify what they believe a future Iraq should look like.

\textsuperscript{363} An Iraqi contestant who, although half-Moroccan, represented Iraq throughout the Star Academy contest. She sang a song for Baghdad and, upon winning, carried the Iraqi flag and stated that this victory was not for her, but for the Iraqi people.

\textsuperscript{364} Abdullah [pseud.], interview by Marwa Alkhairo, tape recording, Virginia, 27 December 2007.
Collectively, most of these interviewees dismiss the present and project their nostalgia toward the future in order to salvage the Iraqi national identity and identify with a unified, multicultural, and democratic Iraq. More specifically, they hope to recreate the “Real Iraq” through present-day notions of democracy and multiculturalism. A majority of them want a unified centralized government with strong local councils\textsuperscript{365} so that local concerns can be addressed while national issues remain in Baghdad. In addition, they believe that this is the best way to provide equal protection to the rights of all Iraqis and maintain the unification of the country and its people. They believe that Iraqi society has been put on the “backburner” long enough and that it is time that the Iraqi people become the government’s main priority. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of repatriating Iraqi minority refugees such as the Shabak, for example, so that the country’s ancient societal makeup and mosaic will not be destroyed.

They argue that democracy should not be imposed by external force but that it should be an indigenous process that takes their society’s makeup, history, and culture into consideration. Most, if not all, of the interviewees similarly said that they strongly support the separation of religion from state and do not believe that religious rather than secular parties and leaders should run the country. Furthermore, although Islam is the country’s main religion, they want the Iraqi Constitution to be influenced by secular, not religious, values. They believe that they will be able to relate to a future Iraq only if the

\textsuperscript{365} Several interviewees suggested that Iraq should have a federal system of government based on the country’s geographic provinces. Other interviewees believed that Iraqi Kurdistan should become an independent state.
violence stops and the unity that exists in their memories of the “Real Iraq” becomes a reality in the future.

Nevertheless, until now many of those interviewees who label themselves “Real Iraqis” remain diasporically disenchanted and have taken no tangible measures to project toward the future their image of the “Real Iraq” and its re-creation as a unified Iraq. However, this inactivity should not be dismissed as a sign of disconnect with Iraq, but rather as a connection that has been scarred. The image of the “Real Iraq” is consistently being re-created in their minds, and this is the ideal that they believe is worth working for. Even though they are interpreting themselves and their narratives are changing according to what is going on in Iraq now, they say that they have only a tenuous link to the physical land. They have become increasingly disillusioned, confused, and frustrated with the ongoing war, occupation, humanitarian crisis, and especially the cycle of sectarian and ethnic violence.

As they do not identify the “Real Iraq” with today’s Iraq, they see no point in working for the latter. Post-2003 Iraq is no longer a “mythical home,” and many see themselves establishing permanent residence in the United States and perhaps eventually becoming an ethnic, rather than a diasporic, community. According to Khachig Tololyan, an Armenian scholar of the diaspora,

… an ethnic community differs from a diaspora [viz., a diasporic community] by the extent to which the latter’s commitment to maintain connections with its homeland and its kin communities in other states is absent, weak, at best intermittent, and manifested by individuals rather than the community as a whole.366

In essence, there is no “Real Iraq” to which they can return or for which they can work. This is especially the case now, for Iraqi children born to Iraqi immigrant parents in the United States will have no memories of their own about, or any physical connection with, Iraq. I therefore suggest that there are two potential outcomes for the diasporists interviewed for this thesis: (1) the Arabs, Kurds, and other interviewees who identify as Iraqi will eventually become an ethnic, rather than a diasporic, community with only a limited connection to Iraq. As generations pass, both Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan will become ancestral references with which only some individuals will maintain any connection; and (2) the separatist Kurds will remain a diasporic community with a myth of return, or at least the continuous dream of an independent state called Kurdistan. In essence, the fate of the Iraqi state determines the fate of the diasporists who come from it.

Many of the interviewees say there is no longer a state and that only the nation exists. In their personal narratives, this nation is the diaporic nation that exists through their memories of the “Real Iraq” and that is grounded in pre-Ba`thi Iraq. Currently, their fantasy of this historical era and their memories are the only homeland with which they feel any affiliation. Appadurai’s distinction between fantasy and imagination is useful to understanding my interviewees’ diasporic condition. He says:

…”The idea of fantasy carries with it the inescapable connotation of thought divorced from projects and actions, and it also has a private, even individualistic sound about it. Fantasy can dissipate but the imagination, especially when collective, can become the fuel for action. It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule.”

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367 Appadurai, Modernity at Large, 7.
Currently, the Iraqi diasporists whom I interviewed are living in a fantasy of what was. They are the inhabitants of an imagined nation, the “Real Iraq,” which exists purely in their individual memories. As a result, there is no present-day homeland with which they can relate. Their new adopted home has become their diasporic refuge away from what has disillusioned them. Even though their current inactivity may be linked to their high level of denial and disillusionment with what is taking place in Iraq today, their aspirations for the future relay a different narrative. Their hopes are symbolic of an imagined nation that they yearn to sustain; however, the real nation is in need of a democratic, multicultural, and pluralistic system of governance that emphasizes the unity of Iraqi society.

Although I predict that this community may eventually become an ethnic community, I also suggest that depending upon how the situation develops in Iraq and upon any signs of hope, there is reason to believe they will continue as a diasporic community. A future Iraqi nation must re-imagine itself around a state in which the diasporic Iraqis can collectively believe. To many, this can happen only if there is an Iraqi government that prioritizes the unification of society. If this indeed materializes, the state may begin to be re-imagined, and diasporic Iraqis will shift from sustaining a fantasy to creating an imagination around active enchantment and the rebuilding of their homeland and society. Diasporic Iraqis, whose numbers have increased significantly since the 2003 refugee crisis, can make great contributions to Iraq’s future. Even though their diasporic disenchantment may prove otherwise, I believe that their memories and hopes can lead them to a state of active enchantment, for the vast majority of these people are deeply
invested in Iraq’s future and yearn for a unified Iraq that they once lived in – the “Real Iraq.”
Bibliography


