TRANSLATING IRAQ: THE "UNKNOWN SOLDIERS" OF THE US OCCUPATION OF IRAQ

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ABSTRACT

Iraqis who worked with the US occupation Army in Iraq after the war in 2003 experienced extraordinary challenges and risks as a result of their jobs. My thesis examines the experiences of these Iraqis who worked for the US Army in Iraq and who eventually immigrated to the United States. The study explores this experience by focusing on (a) the immense need to hire native Iraqis to mediate between US troops and locals due to the poor linguistic and cultural preparations of the US Army, (b) the significance of these local linguistic and cultural mediators and their critical roles, and (c) the risks these Iraqis experienced and their immigration and adjustment experience in the US.

Drawing attention to the unknown destiny of thousands of Iraqis who helped America in Iraq, this study engages the testimonies of six US-affiliated Iraqis and four US veterans of Iraq. My ethnography and data analysis reveal that these native Iraqis provided the US Army with an abundant and cheap source of linguistic, cultural, and mediation services without which the US troops would not have had the ability to function in Iraq. However, these Iraqis occupy a historically awkward and ambiguous position as natives who collaborate with invading forces. As a result, at least hundreds of them were murdered by insurgent and extremist groups. In this thesis, I provide evidence that the courage and the services these Iraqis provided qualify them to be considered as honorable members of the US armed forces and to be rewarded as the “unknown soldiers” of the Iraq war. The US government made serious and sincere endeavors to protect the lives of these Iraqis and their
families by legislating Special Immigrant Visa programs since 2006 to allow some of them resettle in the US. However, since US forces will withdraw completely from Iraq on December 2011, I contend that the US has a moral responsibility to protect the lives of thousands of other Iraqis who assisted America and who remain in Iraq fearful for their lives and those of their families.
To my parents, brothers and sisters, and my uncle Dr. Luuai AlBaldawi who sincerely supported me. This thesis is also dedicated to the thousands of Iraqis who risked their lives to serve Iraq.
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INTRODUCTION

I spent my childhood in England when my father studied for his doctorate. I went to schools in England and learned the English language there. When we came back, we got stuck in Iraq because of the Saddam Hussein regime’s military regulations during the Iraq-Iran war. In Iraq, I felt like I was losing hope in everything, as if I were dying slowly. I kept dreaming of living in the West again, and when Americans invaded Iraq in 2003, it seemed to me a golden opportunity which I was waiting 20 years for, to mix with Americans by working with them as an interpreter, to make money, and to immigrate. I never regret the experience that made some of my dreams come true, but it came at enormous sacrifices.¹

I met Noor at a grocery store in the United States. A young Iraqi man in his thirties, Noor had recently arrived in the US with his wife and son. I was impressed to notice that although he had been in the US only for a few months, Noor spoke very good English and already had a job. He told me about his ambitious dreams in America and I was struck by how well he seemed to be adjusting to the US lifestyle. Later I came to know that Noor had worked as an interpreter with the US Army in Iraq for several years and that he was granted refugee status in the US as a result of this affiliation with the US Army. Subsequently, I met other Iraqis in the US who were granted Special Immigrant Visas on the grounds of their working as interpreters with US forces in Iraq. These Iraqis, like Noor, who worked as interpreters for the US Army after the US occupation of Iraq in 2003 experienced extraordinary challenges and risks as a result of their assistance of the US occupation forces. Since the US occupation in 2003, these Iraqi interpreters and their families have been targets of insurgents and extremist groups who labeled any Iraqi
with US affiliation as a collaborator and traitor. As a result, at least a few hundred local Iraqi
interpreters were killed and thousands of them escaped to other countries.

My thesis focuses on the experiences of these local Iraqi interpreters who worked for the
US Army in Iraq since 2003 and who eventually immigrated to the United States through the
Special Immigration Visa Legislation (SIV) program passed by Congress in 2006. My research,
drawing on personal narratives, media reports, and scholarly work, explores the unique role of
these Iraqi interpreters by juxtaposing the US linguistic preparations for the war and the immense
need for local interpretation services with the significance of local interpreters, in comparison
with other categories of non-local interpreters, in the US occupation of Iraq. I explore the
expanded roles and responsibilities of these Iraqi interpreters in assisting the US Army and the
numerous risks they experienced as a consequence of their work with the US occupation forces.
Finally, this thesis also examines the US government’s response to the precarious lives of Iraqi
interpreters and the immigration and adjustment experience in the United States of those Iraqi
interpreters who are granted refuge in the United States.

The experience involved in working for the US invading forces in Iraq under a foreign
occupation was shaped by the toppling of the deep-rooted dictatorship of Saddam Hussein’s
dictatorship and the aftermath of the 2003 war. Hence, Iraqi interpreters’ experiences are
embedded in the intricacies of Iraq’s history of political and ethnic conflicts. Therefore, to
understand what is special about the Iraqi interpreters’ experience, one must examine the larger
context of Iraqi political history, the historically deep-rooted and continuous ethnic conflicts, as
well as the Iraqi realities with which interpreters lived and operated.
Iraq: an Historical Overview

Iraq, the land of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and the site of ancient Mesopotamia, is the cradle of civilizations and is home to a diversity of ethnicities and ethno-religious groups. Prior to the Arab Muslim conquest in the seventh century, Iraq was land of ancient civilizations including Sumer, Akkad, Assyria, and BABYLONIA. These civilizations are credited with the invention of the alphabet, settled agriculture, and lawmaking. By the seventh century, the heterogeneous population of Iraq consisted of Aramaic-speaking Christian Assyrians who were the indigenous people of Iraq and descendants of Assyria; Arab tribes that inhabited the desert region to the west of the Euphrates; and Kurds who inhabited the northwest hill and mountain areas of Iraq. Jewish communities were found throughout the country and their existence in Iraq dates back to as far as the second century. In addition, there were a notable number of Mandaens (also known as Subbi), Persians, and smaller ethnic groups such as Yezidis.

Modern Iraq is a land area of 436,800 square kilometers, as large as the area of California. In 2009, it had an estimated population of 31,234,000. The country is located in northwest Asia and is bordered by Turkey in the north, Syria in the northwest, Jordan in the west, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in the south, and Iran in the east.

The Iraqi population is ethnically and religiously diverse today. Arabs speak the Arabic language and comprise 75 to 80% of Iraq’s population. Kurds speak Kurdish and form the second largest ethnic group in Iraq, representing 15 to 20% of the population. In addition to Arabs and Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Armenians, who speak the Aramaic language and are Christians, form a significant ethnic minority. The Turkmens, ethnic kin of Turks who speak a dialect of Turkish and who came first with the Arab Muslim conquest Army in the seventh century, are also a notable minority. Other smaller ethnic minorities are the Mandaens who speak
an Aramaic dialect known as Mandic; Yezidis who speak a dialect close to Kurdish; Shabaks who speak an Indo-European language of Turkish and Arabic origin; Jews who were almost entirely expelled from Iraq in the 1950s; Persians who were deported from Iraq in the 1980s; and Gypsies. Due to the absence of a census in the last decade and due to the consequences of the US invasion of Iraq on ethnic conflicts, it is difficult to determine the current size of the minorities’ population in Iraq.

The majority of Iraqis (about 97%) are Muslims who belong to the two major sects of Islam, the Shia or the Sunni. Christians constitute a small minority of the Iraqi population. These communities are distributed throughout Iraq with distinct religious and ethnic identities. Arab Shias comprise about 60% of the population and they mainly inhabit nine southern provinces extending from Baghdad to the southern city of Basra. They inhabit the cities and towns on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers such as Kut and Amara on the Tigris, and Diwanyia, Hilla, Nasiriya, Samawwa, and the cities of the holy shrines—Karbala and Najaf on the Euphrates. This landscape of Iraq is rich in agriculture, oil, and religious tourism. Arab Shias also form the majority of Baghdad’s population and the oil-rich southern city of Basra.4

Arab Sunnis comprise about 18% of the population and inhabit mainly three provinces of Salah al Deen, al Anbar, and Mosul, areas to the north and west of Baghdad. They inhabit towns and cities on the banks of the Tigris to the north of Baghdad—Samarra, Tikrit, and the northern big city of Mosul. To the west of Baghdad, Arab Sunnis live in the desert region of the Al-Anbar province which includes a string of towns stretching on the banks of the Euphrates from Fallujah near Baghdad west to the Syrian borders; towns such as Ramadi, Ana, Rawa, and Haditha. The landscape is poor in natural resources and agriculture. Arab Sunnis also comprise a significant population of Diyala province, northeast of Baghdad, which is a fertile land watered
by the Tigris and is a place for fruits, vegetables, and cereal cultivation. There is also an Arab Sunni population in Baghdad as well as a small number of Arab Sunni in Basra.⁵

The upper northern hilly and mountainous areas mark Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurds form about 20% of the population. The majority of Kurds adhere to Islam and follow Sunni Islam while a minority known as Faylis are Shia Kurds. The lower northern cities of Kirkuk and Mosul are a mosaic of people including Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Shabak, Yezidis, and Chaldeo-Assyrians. Arab Sunnis are the majority of Mosul with large communities of Kurds, Turkmens, and Assyrian Christians. The Turkmens are Muslims, Sunnis, and Shias, and are found in Mosul and Kirkuk.⁶ Given this ethnic and religious diversity and in considering the percentage of each ethnic group, Iraqi society generally is usually divided into three distinct communities: the Kurds in the north, the Arab Sunnis in the middle and west, and the Arab Shia in the south of Iraq.⁷

The modern state of Iraq emerged out of the World War I. It was carved from three former provinces of the Ottoman Empire and created under the British occupation in 1918. Before that history, Iraq was a site of invasions and conflicts between rival empires. The territory was invaded and ruled by Arab Muslims from 636 to 1258 and then by the Mongols until 1508. Iraq was next a site of rivalry between the Persian Shia Safavids and the Turk Ottoman Sunni. The Safavids, who converted Iran to Shism Islam, conquered Baghdad in 1508 and ruled until the Ottoman conquest of Iraq in 1534. The Ottoman Empire ruled Iraq from 1534 to the fall of their empire and the British occupation of Iraq in 1918.⁸

The rivalry between the Ottomans and Persians had been a Sunni-Shia conflict that was played out in Iraq. The modern and current conflicts in Iraq can be traced to this history of conflict.⁹ The Persians and Ottomans promoted the Shism and Sunnis respectively to gain Iraqi support. The Shia Safavids oppressed Sunnis in Iraq during their brief reign (1508-1534), while
the Ottomans immeasurably persecuted the Shias. During four centuries of Ottoman rule, Sunnism was the only officially recognized sect of Islam. The Sunnis in Iraq, therefore, dominated the Army, government, and judiciary. The Shias, on the other hand, were systematically excluded and discriminated against. At the same time, it is important to note that the terrain of Iraq inhabited by Kurds enjoyed a form of autonomy under Ottoman rule, although the Kurds were used by the Ottoman Empire to fight the Persian Empire on its borders.

The British occupation government in Iraq, therefore, inherited the sectarian and ethnic division of the Ottoman Empire. Since the Sunnis were dominant in the Ottoman reign, they continued to hold leadership positions in Iraq under the British mandate. Upon the announcement of the British mandate of Iraq in 1920, the Shia, led by tribal and religious leaders, revolted against the British in what was called “the 1920 revolution.” The uprising was suppressed quickly by the British forces. In 1921, King Faisal, son of Sharif Hussein of the Hejaz, was brought from Syria and installed as King of Iraq which assured the Sunnis that Shias would not be able to hold power. The Kurds, who first welcomed the British in the hope that they would pave the way for their independence, revolted against the British twice, in 1919 and in 1922. The Sunni elite, therefore, continued holding power in Iraq from the period of the monarchy until the coup of 1958.

The British mandate introduced a structure of institutions in Iraq molded by the colonial Indian experience. The British replaced the Ottoman tribal policy with a new policy that aimed at promoting the tribal sheiks’ responsibility over law and order. The sheiks would be able to collect the revenue in their districts for which the British would grant them some privileges. The British assisted in the making of the 1925 constitution of Iraq and in holding elections and forming cabinets. The British created a new educational system, replaced the Ottoman currency
with the Indian rupee, and established a military system staffed by Indians. One of the important legacies of the British mandate was the exploration and concession of oil in the 1920s to a consortium of Anglo-Iranian, Shell, Mobil and Standard Oil of New Jersey and known as the Iraq Petroleum Company, although Iraq began to gain substantial oil revenue only in the 1950s. The British mandate, however, was ended in 1932 when Iraq was admitted to the League of Nations and granted its independence.

The period between the end of the British mandate in 1932 to the fall of the monarchy in a military coup in 1958 was marked by political turbulence. The country witnessed seven military coups between 1936 and 1941. During the 1940s, Arab nationalism flourished in Iraq promoted by Iraqi Army officers, while simultaneously anti-Zionist sentiment became widespread in the region. The Arab-Israeli war of 1948 had disastrous consequence for the Jewish community in Iraq. The harassment against Jews in Iraq reached its peak at the end of the 1940s. By 1951, the Iraqi government allowed the air lifting of Jews to Israel and around 160,000 Iraqi Jews left for Israel. The following decades witnessed the emigration of the remaining small number of Jews, bringing an end to the existence of one of the indigenous communities in Iraq. The Arab nationalism movement also tended to alienate the Shia and Kurdish populations in Iraq who were already wary of the Sunni domination under the British mandate. Favoring the broader goal of Arab nationalism on the interior Iraqi unity, the Arab nationalists maintained the dominance of Sunnis in Iraq at the expense of the Shias and Kurds. The 1930s and 1940s also witnessed the establishment of two political parties — the Iraqi communist party, which was founded in 1934 and was influenced by the Soviet Union, and the Baath party, was founded first in Syria in 1940 and influenced by Arab nationalists. Bitter conflict and political rivalry have marked relations between the two parties.
The 14 July coup in 1958 dismantled the monarchy and Iraq became a republic. Led by prominent Iraqi Army officers, the 1958 coup brought a brief period (1958-1963) when Shias and Kurds became an important part of the leadership in Iraq. Abd al Kareem Kasim, an Iraqi nationalist Army officer who was of mixed Sunni-Shia background, tended to promote a secular state. Kasim did not descend from the Arab Sunni environment and he was not enthusiastic about the pan-Arabism trend. He established friendly relations with the Soviet Union, lifted a ban on the communist party, and supported the communists in Iraq. He had great popularity especially among the Iraqi Shia. As to the Kurdish issue, Kasim granted amnesty to the Kurdish exile, Mulla Mustafa Barazani, and promised to grant the Kurds regional autonomy in return for their support for his policies. In other words, the Kasim reign was a boom for the secular state in which Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds participated in the government.

The Era of Baath Party Rule before Saddam Hussein 1968-1979

In 1963, the Baath party led a coalition of pan-Arab leaders and some Army units in a coup which overthrew Kasim’s government. Many Iraqi Army officers were motivated to participate in the coup to eliminate the communists. The Baath party carried out a house to house campaign against communists, arresting and killing them, including Kasim and thousands of his sympathizers, especially in the Shia neighborhoods. Although a Baath party militia led by Saddam Hussein participated in the 1963 coup, the government was headed by pan-Arab Iraqi Army officers, Abdul Salam Arif and his brother Abdul Rahman Arif. Arif’s rule continued for five years until the Baath party came to power through the 1968 coup. Once again, Sunnis in Iraq, represented by the Baath party and the pan-Arab nationalist, regained power in Iraq.
In July 1968, the Baath party returned to power with a determination not to lose the power again. The party launched a successful bloodless coup against Abdul Rahman Arif but that was the beginning of a ruthless totalitarian regime that would control Iraq until the US invasion in 2003. The two key figures of the party were Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein, both were Sunni and were from the Sunni city of Tikrit. Al Bakr held the office of the President, Prime Minister, and commander in chief of the armed forces while Saddam Hussein was assumed to be the deputy secretary of the party and in charge of the internal security apparatus. The Baath reign in Iraq can be divided into two distinct stages: al-Bakr’s era 1968-1979, and Saddam Hussein’s era 1979-2003.

The Baath party reign in Iraq is described as a reign of terror and dictatorship. Institutional violence shaped its rule between 1968 and 2003. After the successful coup, Saddam launched a purge campaign of the top Baath leadership to eliminate rivals and to cow potential opponents. After the nationalization of oil in 1972 and subsequent developments in the educational, health care, and economic sectors, the party started to lay the foundation of a totalitarian state. The Baath party adopted a fascist ideology which aimed at the Baathization of the military, state institutions, and Iraqi society.16

The Baath party established what Iraqi writer Samir al-Khalil describes as “a republic of fear” and the security apparatus was the source of fear in this republic.17 The ubiquitous secret police was strengthened with the establishment of numerous security institutions including the Amn al-Amm (Public Security) the Mukhabrat (General Intelligence Service), and the Istikhabarat Askairyya (Military Intelligence), in addition to the regular Army, police, and the Baath militia. The al-Jihaz al khas, the special apparatus, however, was the most notorious secret police that was directly run by Saddam Hussein. Saddam appointed Nadhim Kzar as the chief of the special
apparatus. Kzar was notorious for his sadistic practices to the extent that he provoked terror even inside the party itself. Kzar tortured thousands of Kurds and communists. In 1973, however, Kzar was executed by the Baath regime for planning a failed coup.

The Baath party based the state structure on kin, clan, and ethnic and sectarian loyalties of its top officials that allowed them to control the country. The Baath leadership and its loyal masses were mainly from Arab Sunni communities in three cities in the middle of Iraq—Mosul, Al Anbar, Salah Al Deen and from Saddam’s city of Tikrit. In this respect, the Sunni minority had acquired tremendously powerful positions in the Army, party leadership, and in various security apparatuses.17

The Baathists had identified the Shia religious movements as the major threat to its regime. It first began to strip the Marji’iyya, the highest Shia religious authority, of its role and began to oppress its sympathizers. The Baath regime then tightened control over Shia political activities and banned Shia religious rituals. When the Baath regime strengthened its power at the end of the 1970s, it launched bloody campaigns against the Shias especially against the Da’wa Party followers. In 1977, thousands of Shias were arrested and some of them were executed during their observation of the Ashura religious practice in the city of Karbala.18 During the late 1970s, tens of thousands of Shia were arrested, tortured, and executed for their purported affiliation with the Da’wa Party. Preparing the public for the Iraq-Iran war, the Baath regime executed a deportation campaign of about 250,000 Arab Shias and Kurd Shias mainly from the southern Shia cities on the basis of their Iranian descent. Simultaneously, Ayatollah Khomeini, who had spent 13 years in Najaf, was expelled from Iraq. The enmity against the Iraqi Shia, however, was significantly promoted by two major events: the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 and the inauguration of Saddam Hussein as president of Iraq. The Baath power was strong
enough to put an end to any political Shia threat by arresting, torturing, and executing the prominent Shia figure Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir Al Sadr and his sister Bint al-Huda in 1980.

It was not only the Shia who suffered persecution under the Sunni Baath regime. Other ethnic and religious minorities also experienced tremendous oppression. Immediately after the 1968 coup, Jews in Iraq were used in Baath-Arab nationalism and anti-Zionism propaganda. The regime executed 17 alleged spies of Zionism, 13 of them Iraqi Jews, in *Sahat Al Tahreer* (the liberation square) in the heart of Baghdad. The few hundred Jews remaining in Iraq, therefore, fled Iraq. As to the Kurdish turbulence, the Baath regime used the carrot-and-stick approach with the Kurds during the 1970s. The Baath regime mobilized Iraqi troops to attack Kurdish areas as they had done in 1969. Meanwhile, the Kurd leader Mulla Mustafa al-Brazani sought the aid of Iran, Israel, and the United States to arm his Kurdish militias. Two fragile agreements were signed by the Baath and Kurdish leadership in 1970 and 1975, but the relationship continued to deteriorate. The 1975 agreement allowed the Baath regime to occupy the entire region of Kurdistan, execute large-scale relocation of Kurds, and change the demography of the Kurdish areas by reducing the Kurdish populations. In addition, the Kurdish language was replaced by Arabic in schools and state institutions. In 1979, Mulla Brazani died in exile in Iran, and by 1980 the Kurdish areas were under Baath control.

Meanwhile, the Baath regime launched a large scale campaign of Arabization in the ethnically diverse cities of Mosul and Kirkuk. The Arabic language became the official language of education, media, and state institutions throughout Iraq and non-Arabs such as the Kurds, Turkmens, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Shabak, and Yezidis had to learn Arabic and teach it to their children. Other ethnic languages and dialects were banned such as the Turkish language spoken by the Turkmens. Non-Muslim religious minorities were subjected to Islamic jurisprudence in
civil laws concerning issues such as marriage. The Baath party eliminated ethnic and religious tolerance and imposed Arab Sunni color on the mosaic combination of the Iraqi society.

By the end of 1979, the Baath regime had firmly controlled the Kurdish insurrection in the north and the Shia unrest in the south. Meanwhile, the Baath regime used the huge oil revenue to execute drastic economic and modernization developments in Baghdad and in other Iraqi provinces. The rapid economic boom provided an atmosphere of prosperity that served to deflect attention from the ruthless internal policies of the regime. The larger part of the oil revenue, however, went into building a massive military arsenal and developing a nuclear program.

*The Saddam Hussein Regime 1979-2003*

The second era of the Baath regime is marked by the inauguration of Saddam Hussein as president of Iraq (1979-2003). The Saddam Hussein era brought devastating consequences on all levels of Iraqi life. Iraq gradually shifted from a one-party state to a dictatorship dependent exclusively on Saddam and his close family members. Saddam’s discovery of an alleged plot against his government planned by a number of Baathist high leaders resulted in his purging his Baath rivals and tightening his own clan and sectarian domination of power.

Saddam began his reign by launching a disastrous war with Iran (1980-1988). Although the war ended in a stalemate, the consequences were devastating for Iraq. One million Iraqi lives were lost, irreparably damaging the social structure, and leaving increasing numbers of widows, orphans, and unmarried young women. On one hand, the war destroyed the economic growth of the 1970s since the infrastructure and civil institutions were targeted during eight years of fierce fighting. On the other hand, oil revenue was drastically reduced due to the closure of the Syrian
pipelines and consequently available oil revenues were put into the war affairs. In addition, the war cost Iraq about $1 billion a month and about $50 billion in debts and loans.21

It was at the beginning of the 1980s that Noor, the Iraqi interpreter who worked for the US Army in Iraq and whom I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, returned with his parents to Iraq from England. The military codes under Saddam’s regime imposed compulsory military service on every male adult and restricted adult Iraqi males from traveling abroad. Hence, the return was disastrous for Noor and his parents who were severely constrained by these new rules and who went through war conditions and economic hardship throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

The Iraqi domestic support of the war was ethnically divided. Saddam’s agenda behind the war was shaped by the fear of the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran and the advent of Ayatollah Khomeini, a Shia to power. Saddam’s regime particularly feared the influence of the Islamic revolution in motivating Iraqi Shia to revolt against his regime. The war, therefore, was supported by the Sunni communities in Iraq. In addition the Arab Sunni surrounding countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Egypt, supported Saddam’s regime in the war —militarily, diplomatically, and financially.22 The war, however, was not popular among the Shia communities in the south. The Shias were made to form the bulk of the operating soldiers at the fronts and were the majority of the Iraqi causalities in the war. The nature of the battles and the shared borders made the Shia cities in the south the sites of most of the battles, thus inflicting damage and ruin on the Shias and their towns. Throughout the war, the regime continued to persecute Shias and to assassinate Shia figures in Iraq and abroad. In the northern part of Iraq, the Kurds were not in favor of Saddam’s war. In fact, the defection of Kurdish soldiers and officers increased gradually. In retaliation, the regime responded with numerous harsh military campaigns, especially against the Brazani clan, which killed thousands of Kurds. With the war
approaching its end, Saddam’s regime launched the notorious Anfal campaign, meaning spoils campaign, against the Kurds in 1987. During the brutal campaign, the regime bombarded the city of Halabja with prohibited chemical gases killing about 5,000 Kurds. Human rights groups estimated the Kurdish causalities at about 100,000 dead, 4,000 destroyed villages, and 1.5 million Kurdish refugees. The level of brutality and killings in the Anfal campaign was unprecedented, and it resulted in international outrage and charges of genocide. By the time the ceasefire was announced between Iraq and Iran, the war had already exhausted Iraq economically, damaged Iraqi society, and put Iraq’s future at stake. But, it strengthened the regime’s control on Iraq and resulted in a strong Iraqi Army in the Gulf area.

In 1990, Saddam’s regime invaded Kuwait a disastrous decision that brought damaging consequences for Iraq. Based on his personal ambitions and on a miscalculation of the international response, Saddam’s army occupied Kuwait and announced its annexation to Iraq. Consequently, the United States led an international coalition to expel the Iraqi forces from Kuwait in what came to be known as the Gulf war. Iraq was struck with massive air bombardment which ruined much of the infrastructure and resulted in thousands of causalities. Iraqi forces were expelled from Kuwait with little resistance. The United States also launched a massive air bombardment against retreating Iraqi troops. Iraq, therefore, suffered, in addition to the economic loss, a huge human loss of between 94,000 and 281,000 lives.

The angry Shia masses responded to the disaster of the war by rebelling in March 1991 against what seemed a falling regime. The intifada, uprising, started in Basra and spread rapidly to include the entire Shia south. The Shia uprising was largely spontaneous and led by retreating soldiers of the Kuwait war and poor masses in addition to the Shia exiles in Iran. The rebels controlled the entire terrain south of Baghdad and attacked the regime’s symbols such as the
Baath party offices and the security headquarters. The uprising, however, was crushed by the regime in one month. The failure of the uprising was significantly due to the United States decision not to support it, although President Bush earlier made public calls for Iraqi military and civilians to overthrow the regime. Supported by Sunni Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Saddam’s regime brutally put down the Shia rebellion by sending out units of Republican Guards and special security forces who were headed by Sunni leaders and were motivated by sectarian hatred. The tanks of the Republican Guards carried banners with the phrase “la shai ba’ad al-youm,” meaning there will be no Shia after today. The regime forces committed atrocities and huge massacres in the Shia south during which thousands of people were killed and thousands of others were rounded up from streets and buried in what would later emerge as mass graves. Republican Guards damaged many parts of the holy shrines in Karbala and Najaf, caused large scale ruin in Shia towns, and displaced tens of thousands as refugees. The Shia, therefore, lived in terror, alienated by Saddam’s regime more than at any other time and their feeling of betrayal by the West and the United States.

The Kurds simultaneously rebelled against Saddam’s regime in March 1991. The uprising’s nature and reasons were significantly similar to that in the Shia south. Lacking international support, the Kurdish uprising was repressed by Saddam’s regime immediately after controlling the Shia rebellion in the south. As in the south, the regime committed numerous massacres and used phosphorous bombs to control the rebellion. The suppression of the rebellion resulted in a human disaster for the Kurds, in the number of causalities and their mass exodus to the borders with Turkey and Iran. The humanitarian crisis was unprecedented. About two million of the Kurdish population (half of the total Kurdish population) became refugees in
the mountainous areas. The number of the deaths reached 1,000 a day due to the shortage of food, clothing, and shelter.

The post-uprising era eventually brought the Kurds relative relief from the regime’s control. Unlike the Shia in the south, the humanitarian crisis in the north stirred the Western powers and the United States to execute Operation Provide Comfort and relief efforts in April 1991. To guarantee safe operations and the successful return of millions of refugees, the United States ordered Saddam’s regime to cease all military activity in the northern region and announced a No Fly Zone. Simultaneously, President Bush ordered US troops to participate in the creation of a “safe haven” under the umbrella of the United Nations. Iraqi forces withdrew from the Kurdish areas by the end of 1991, and the three Kurdish provinces came under UN international protection until the fall of Saddam’s regime in 2003. Unlike the Shia in the south and the Kurds in the north, the central four provinces, the Arab Sunni communities, were silent during the uprising and remained loyal to Saddam’s regime and supportive of the retaliation against the uprisings.

Saddam’s regime survived a humiliating defeat in Kuwait and a serious uprising in 1991. While this survival strengthened the regime’s internal power, Iraqi people suffered the consequences of the war. The UN imposed severe international sanctions on Iraq that hurt the Iraqi people economically, socially, and psychologically, but failed to weaken the regime. The economic slump was alarming with mass unemployment and decline in the exchange rate of the Iraqi dinar. Consequently, food prices increased over 50 times and the GNP fell drastically. Corruption had spread widely in the state sectors due to the severe decline in salaries. Many Iraqis, therefore, suffered severe poverty and malnutrition. At that time, schoolteachers and other professionals were earning as low as the equivalent of five dollars a month. A mass emigration
of professionals, therefore, represented an enormous brain drain in Iraq in the 1990s. The sanctions damaged the medical care system due to the lack of medical supplies and the emigration of doctors. The war’s aftermath and the use of chemical weapons caused rising numbers of lethal diseases such as cancer and high rates of infant mortality. The various wars and the severe hardship of life resulted in alarming levels of psychological problems among Iraqis. Iraqi psychiatrists estimated that a quarter of the total population suffered from psychological illnesses or disturbances.

The regime tightened its hold on power after its survival in 1991. Following the domestic uprisings, Saddam’s regime tended to rely more heavily on his immediate family and clan to fill the sensitive positions in the government. Meanwhile, the regime began to depend on the tribal sheiks to keep order in their areas. In other words, the regime stirred sectarianism and tribalism by distributing Iraq’s wealth to the Arab Sunni communities that remained loyal to his regime. The Sunnis, therefore, continued to be in favor of the regime and were generously rewarded by the regime for their loyalty while the majority of Shias and Kurds lived on subsidized food and in sub-standard living conditions.

During the 1990s, the regime’s atrocities against Shias became more ruthless. In addition to their poverty and malnutrition, the regime launched a scheme to drain the marshes in the south, a source of natural resources, and as a result it forced about 250,000 inhabitants to leave the areas and settle in camps. The security forces imposed strict punishments against the Shia population and continued arresting and killing Shia religious scholars and potential dissenters. The assassination campaign reached its peak when the regime murdered the highest Shia figure, Ayatollah Mohamed Sadiq al-sadr, and his sons in Najaf in 1999. The Shia’s suppression at the hand of Saddam’s regime extended to include Shia women. For instance, Dr. Sahib al-Halim’s
investigation has uncovered the regime’s atrocities against 4,000 Shia women through a systematic campaign of rape, torture, and murder.\textsuperscript{34}

In a similar way, the Kurds continued to experience the regime’s suppression. Republican Guard units attacked Kurds in 1996 and the Kurdish capital, Arbil, was occupied. The regime’s forces rounded up hundreds of opponents and executed them. Meanwhile, the regime’s forces attacked the Turkmen and Assyrian communities in Kirkuk to drive these communities out of their town and villages in order to Arabize these areas. Thus, the displaced Arab Shias from the southern marshes were used to change the demography of Kirkuk. This restructuring of Iraq’s population on the basis of ethnicity by Saddam’s regime would result in sectarian and ethnic conflicts after his fall in 2003.

During the 1990s, the internal and external opposition to Saddam’s regime increased. The regime’s policy of promoting his immediate Sunni clan—albu Nasir, of Tikrit—freed the Tikritees’ hands to control state wealth and higher positions at the expense of other Sunni clans. The supremacy of Saddam’s clan over other Sunni clans, among other reasons, left the latter dissatisfied with the regime. The dissatisfaction reached its peak when the Sunni Juburi clan attempted two coups to assassinate Saddam in 1991 and 1992. The regime survived other coups such as the prominent attempt led by Sunni Al-Dulaimi tribe in 1994.\textsuperscript{35} The defection reached to Saddam’s family itself. In this regard, Saddam’s oldest son Udayy, notorious for his sadism, acquired tremendous powers politically and economically. He organized smuggling networks with close figures to export Iraqi oil and made massive personal wealth and became a potential successor to Saddam. The conflict with Udayy over wealth led Hussein Kamil, Saddam’s son-in-law, to defect with his wife, Saddam’s daughter, to Jordan in 1995.
Saddam’s regime also faced stronger opposition from outside Iraq. Iraqi exiles organized themselves in Iran, Jordan, London, and the United States. The backbone of the opposition was the Shia and Kurds who had been persecuted by Saddam’s regime but had managed to flee Iraq. The opposition held many meetings and eventually announced the establishment of the Iraqi National Congress in Vienna in 1992. The opposition then turned its attention to seeking support from the United States. These efforts were led by Ahmed Chalabi, a prominent Shia figure, who enjoyed good relations with the US Congress. The opposition’s efforts eventually were crowned by the passage and signing of the Iraq Liberation Act by Congress and President Clinton in October 1998. The Act allocated $97 million to fund the military training of opposition militias, and it stated that the United States would support a “regime change” policy. In practical terms, the Iraqi opposition could not cause a change in the regime. They only could launch a propaganda of “regime change” and hope for it.

The hope of changing Saddam’s regime was revived after the terrorist attacks of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. The United States drastically altered its policies in the Middle East. President Bush labeled Iraq as part of the “axis of evil” and made it apparent that the United States would focus on changing Saddam’s regime. In this respect, the build-up to the Iraq war had started with a controversy over Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). During Clinton’s presidency, Saddam Hussein’s regime had a marathon battle of wits with the United Nation’s inspectors of Iraq’s weapons. When Iraq suspended cooperation with UN inspectors in 1998, Clinton’s administration ordered air strikes against Iraq to punish the regime for its non-cooperation and to create the conditions for its overthrow. In 1999, Saddam’s regime dismissed the UN inspectors from Iraq but then announced its intention to cooperate with the UN again. Amid the UN’s apprehensions that Saddam’s regime was still
withholding information, however, the US fears of Iraq’s alleged possession of mass destruction weapons grew. After the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration raised the issue of Iraq’s WMD as a rationale for invading Iraq. Throughout 2002, President Bush repeatedly warned Americans and the world of the threat that Saddam’s regime’s WMD posed and the possible ties of Saddam’s regime with al-Qaeda. Meanwhile, the success of the American invasion of Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban’s regime encouraged the United States to change the Iraqi regime as well. On March 19, 2003, the US began its invasion of Iraq paving the way for a swift change of Saddam’s regime.

_Iraq after the US Invasion in 2003_

I was twenty when the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003. My family and I temporarily moved out before the outbreak of the war from our privileged and Sunni neighborhood in Baghdad to a small Shia village to the north of Baghdad. When we made our trip back home, directly after the fall of Saddam’s regime, the scenes of numerous American military convoys on highways and foreign troops in the towns and neighborhoods prompted my to think about the language and culture barriers the US forces would confront. The US Army started to settle in towns and neighborhoods by establishing numerous military bases in the government buildings of the disposed regime. The US Army and the US military bases desperately needed the services and help of local people. Soon after, I started to hear that the US Army was hiring Iraqis who spoke some English to serve in numerous occupations, the bulk of whom, I learned, served as interpreters.

The first few months after the invasion were a time of optimism and change. The US Ambassador to Iraq, Paul Bremer, headed the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in May
Bremer’s first month witnessed drastic political changes and economic reforms. The CPA decided to dissolve and ban the former Baath Party of Saddam Hussein as well as the Iraqi Army, the security institutions, and other entities affiliated with the former regime. Meanwhile, Bremer introduced a seven-step plan to transfer sovereignty to Iraqis. The political change brought a brief economic boom to Iraq. The CPA introduced ambitious economic reforms and plans aiming at creating employment opportunities, dramatically increasing salaries of governmental employees from $3 to $120 a month, creating a free-market economy in Iraq. The overwhelming chaos on the Iraqi borders helped to revitalize the Iraqi markets after decades of strict control on trade. The flow of numerous products without tariffs, such as cars, electronics, and electrical products from Middle Eastern countries and from China created flourishing markets and absorbed unemployed Iraqis. Hence, Iraqis hoped to regain their status as a rich people with properly functioning services and excellent infrastructure as they had during the 1970s.

The optimism and dreams gradually faded with the outbreak of violence. Directly before the US invasion, Saddam Hussein’s regime had removed vast quantities of weapons and ammunitions from military bases and distributed them in farms and residential areas throughout Iraq. When the war became imminent, and realizing the impossibility of a successful regular military encounter, the former regime prepared itself to fight a guerrilla war following the Vietnamese model and tactics. After the disposal of a Sunni regime and the emergence of a Shia leadership widely supported by the public, the majority of whom were Shia, Sunni-Shia sectarian tension rose to the surface. The new sectarian realities in Iraq unsettled Arab Sunni neighboring countries and threatened to influence their domestic sectarian status quo. Consequently, there
was suspicion that the Arab governments, especially Syria and Saudi Arabia, had allowed the flow of foreign suicide bombers and extremists into Iraq through shared and porous borders.

The emergence of violence, reported in the media as the insurgency, started a different but continuous chapter of violence against the Shia and sometimes against Kurds, Christians, and other ethno-religious groups by mainly Sunni extremist groups. The former regime’s supporters—Baathists, dissolved Army officers, and laid off former security members—joined forces with foreign extremists and foreign terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda to thwart the building of a new political system in Iraq. By September 2003, the insurgency widely spread to the Sunni communities known later as the Sunni Triangle, the region of Iraq between Baghdad, Ramadi, and Mosul. In addition to the Sunni insurgency, a young Shia clergyman, Moqtada al-Sadr, formed the Jayish al Mahd or the Mahdi Army, an armed militia. Al-Sadr depended on his father’s popularity among the poorest and formerly persecuted Shia communities to support his anti-American position.

The new form of violence was opportunistic, sectarian, and sometimes politically oriented. Starting with the first bombing of the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad in August 2003, al-Qaeda, led by the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, became the top concern. Soon after, al-Qaeda resorted to bombings, such as the devastation of the UN building in Baghdad and the blowing up of numerous police stations. Al-Qaeda waged sectarian violence eventually by targeting Iraqi civilians for being Shia or Kurds, as Shia were considered by al-Qaeda to be non-Muslims and Kurds to be agents of the Americans and Jews. George Packer, an American journalist who has written extensively on the Iraq war, reports:

The bombings were widely believed to be the work of foreign fighters affiliated with al-Qaeda. . . the strategy was clear and successful: isolate the American occupiers in Iraq by
driving other foreigners out of the country and intimidating any Iraqis who cooperated with them . . . they introduced forms of violence that the Baathists and Sunni nationalist insurgencies, as brutal as they were, stopped short of; but their tactics advanced goals that were shared by local fighters.44

Meanwhile, insurgent and terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the former Baath party of Saddam Hussein launched a ruthless campaign against local Iraqis who assisted the US Army and US government in Iraq. These terrorist groups considered any Iraqi affiliated with foreigners in Iraq as a collaborator and a spy. Their top targets were Iraqi interpreters who worked with the US Army.

*Local Iraqis Working with the US Forces*

Iraqi interpreters who worked for the US occupation Army in Iraq after 2003 are a relatively small group of thousands of local Iraqi, mostly young men, who provided tremendous and indispensable services for both the US Army and sometimes for the Iraqi people. These interpreters acquired their English-language skills mainly from studying in Iraqi universities and schools. The US Army needed to recruit thousands of local Iraqis to work as interpreters as a result of the US lack of linguistic abilities and preparations for the occupation. Linguistic challenges historically have accompanied the wars of the United States. In the Second World War, for instance, only two “Caucasian” US military personnel had Japanese-language skills at the beginning of the war and the only language support came from “Kibei,” Japanese Americans who had been educated in Japan and spoke Japanese.45 During the 1950-1953 Korean war, the US lack of linguistic skills also appeared as a critical problem. At the beginning of the war, the US Army Security Agency had only two Korean linguists and had a shortage in the supply of
Korean-language dictionaries. This shortage of language skills was a part of the larger failure of US intelligence efforts during the Korean war, whether in the shortage of cryptology skills or information about Korea. Moreover, the US experienced the same linguistic problem a decade later during the Vietnam war. Hence, the lack of US linguistic abilities and preparations for the Iraqi war in 2003 and the dependence of US troops on local interpreters were not novel.

The US Army recruited Iraqi interpreters and categorized them as Category 1, Cat1, interpreters. They were different from Cat2 and Cat3, who were US citizen interpreters, and different from Third Nationality Interpreters. Iraqi interpreters also worked with Multi-National Forces especially in the southern parts of Iraq. These Iraqis were sometimes called linguists, translators, but most often interpreters, or terps as US troops liked to call them. Iraqi interpreters, for the most part Shia and Kurds, were motivated by a desire to make their country a better place after decades of wars and devastation. In addition, the fact that the war had allowed the introduction of a form of capitalism changed the Iraqi lifestyle and increased living expenses. Obtaining convenient pay, therefore, was one of the main reasons that tempted Iraqis to sign up as interpreters.

Iraqi interpreters have been vital and indispensable to US Army missions in Iraq. Although the US government hired hundreds of American and Arab-American contractors to serve as interpreters and linguists as Cat2 and Cat3, they soon realized the need for a substantial number of local Iraqis for various reasons. First, the US government was not able to recruit adequate number of US citizens with Arabic-language capabilities. Secondly, local interpreters provided an abundant and affordable source of interpretation services. More importantly, they were natives who spoke with native accents and had crucial local knowledge that Americans needed to communicate and interact fruitfully with average Iraqis. Hence, thousands of local
Iraqi interpreters played a critical role in the US occupation of Iraq by bridging the linguistic and cultural gap between Iraqis, who have lived in isolation for decades under Saddam Hussein’s regime, and American troops who are mostly non-Arabic speakers and have poor knowledge of Iraqi culture. Interpreters not only served as a linguistic bridge but also found themselves explaining the traditions, culture, and “mindset” of Iraqis for Americans and sometimes conversely. Soon after, Iraqi interpreters found themselves serving as cultural advisors, native informants, and critically important members of their military units. Thus they became the window through which American soldiers viewed Iraq.

However, what initially had been a decent job became, over the course of the war, a tremendously dangerous job that cost interpreters not only their lives but their families’ lives as well. In contrast to US soldiers who are protected in military bases, interpreters are Iraqi civilians who, after their work, live among their families, making them very easy targets of insurgents and extremist militias. As a result, interpreters led unusual lives, improvising awkward strategies of survival. They had to maintain numerous illusions: they kept their jobs secret and invented cover stories to justify their absence from homes; they used nicknames; they adopted fake addresses, ethnic identities, and accents; and they changed their social lives and stayed in hiding. Despite these strategies and precautionary procedures, there was no foolproof way to survive all risks. In other words, exposing the slimmest proof of affiliation with the US Army as an interpreter was all that was required for insurgents not only to murder the person, but also to kill his/her family members, and to blow up their home as well. Insurgent and terrorist groups tended to use ruthless means to punish Iraqi interpreters by kidnapping, torturing, beheading, and circulating the murder of interpreters on DVDs and posting them on websites. According to an official data released by L3 Communication in 2008, one of the contracting companies that recruited local
interpreters, 200 interpreters were killed by 2008. Other unofficial statistics indicated larger number of causalities among interpreters. Interpreting for the US Army in Iraq therefore became one of the deadliest civilian jobs in the world.

In December 2006, after three years of intensive and systematic murder of interpreters at the hand of insurgents of Al-Qaeda and sometimes by the Shia militia of the Al Mahdi Army, the US Congress passed a Special Immigration Visa Program (SIV) allowing some of the interpreters to immigrate to the United States. Progressively, the US Congress passed other several acts to allow Iraqi interpreters to immigrate and resettle in the United States. In this respect, Public Law 109-163 under section 1059 in 2006 and Public Law 110-36 under section 1059 in 2007 were especially designed to help Iraqi interpreters and, the third act, the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act in 2008, was legislated to help all other US-affiliated Iraqis including interpreters. In contrast to the immigration experience of US- affiliated Vietnamese, the immigration experience of Iraqi interpreters to the United States did not take place as soon as that of the Vietnamese affiliated with US Army after the fall of Saigon in 1975. The US-affiliated Vietnamese were evacuated quickly by the thousands which saved their lives. In contrast, Iraqi interpreters were processed through special immigrant visa programs. Each immigration program demanded special eligibility requirements and each followed certain procedures that took different lengths of time to process. Given the security concerns after 9/11 over bringing immigrants from Middle Eastern countries, Iraqi interpreters were submitted to strict security clearance which took many months to process. In addition, they were required to provide numerous documents to complete the immigration process.

The experience of Iraqi interpreters’ resettlement and adjustment in the United States is different from other new immigrants and refugees’ experiences in the United States. Having
worked closely with Americans in Iraq, the Iraqi interpreters surpassed numerous barriers which usually impede the adjustment of new immigrants to the United States. In addition to speaking English, Iraqi interpreters acquired skills that helped them work within the American system. Hence they were familiar with many aspects of American culture and life in the United States even before they entered the US. Iraqi interpreters therefore better adjusted in the United States than other Iraqi immigrants and refugees.

**Methodology and Sources**

The story of Noor and other interpreters frame my study of the significance of Iraqis who worked with the US Army. The research was demanding. The key challenge was in the process of collecting information and data since the topic is very recent and there is limited scholarship and resources on the role of Iraqi interpreters in the US occupation of Iraq. On one hand, the Iraqi press and media were very silent about the issue probably because of the ambiguity of the political and the public stand toward the interpreters. Moreover, the political and the security events in Iraq overwhelmed the Iraqi press and the media with numerous events therefore making invisible for the most part, the circumstances and status of Iraqi interpreters. On the other hand, rather than providing a comprehensive account of their experience, the US press and media briefly covered the issue by highlighting a few aspects of interpreters’ lives, especially the risks they faced. The lack of adequate analysis of the topic made it impossible for me to produce a thesis based on archival scholarship. Hence, I decided to conduct and draw on information obtained through an ethnographic study of Iraqi interpreters who had come to the US as SIV immigrants.
My ethnography was challenging in many ways. It was essential to recruit native Iraqi interpreters who served with the US military in Iraq and who currently live in America. Then, I had to encourage them to share their stories and experiences. However, the fear intrinsic to the risky nature of their work resulted, for valid reasons, in their considerable concerns and fear about speaking about the subject and exposing their experiences. These interpreters went through terrifying and critically challenging experiences during their service in Iraq. For example, most of the Iraqis I interviewed variously experienced attempts at kidnapping or murder by insurgents, received murder threats due to their work, lost a fellow interpreter or a family member while some of them lost limbs in terrorist attacks when they worked with Americans. Later on and during my interviews with them, one interpreter stated, “I cannot believe I am talking with you about this,” while another said, “a conversation like this would have cost me in Iraq my head to be cut off.” Most of my informants revealed that this was the first time they had shared with anyone their experiences of working with the US Army in Iraq. My informants’ fears were compounded by the fact that the insurgency is still on-going on the ground, and that many of them have family members in Iraq. A few other interpreters were unwilling to share their stories because they involve painful and traumatic memories. Hence, my task of recruiting Iraqi interpreter participants proved painstakingly slow and entailed delicate efforts to gain their trust. In addition to these barriers, my pool of potential participants was very limited since I chose to focus specifically on native Iraqi interpreters who had worked with the US Army in Iraq and were currently living in the United States. Most importantly, I was only able to interview interpreters who were willing to participate.

Despite the recruitment challenges, I succeeded through a network of acquaintances that I had cultivated and maintained for over a year and a half, to identify and get in contact with ten
interpreters who are currently living in the United States. However, only six of them eventually agreed to participate in the research. My informants came from a diverse spectrum of educational levels and former careers: English literature students, medical students, oil engineering graduates, a physician working in a hospital, and interpreters with a high school degree formerly working in a candy factory.

I was very restricted when considering the gender identity of my interviewees. Although Iraqi interpreters were both males and females, male interpreters formed the majority. The small number of Iraqi female interpreters who worked with the US Army in Iraq faced greater challenges than males, which made my task of recruiting them in my research virtually impossible. In addition to facing security risks on their lives as experienced by male interpreters, the challenges female interpreters faced came from social considerations that these women appeared to violate their traditional roles and status in a conservative Muslim society. This sensitivity about an Iraqi female’s work with Americans in Iraq was reflected on the ground by public resentment in Iraqi society of these women. Female interpreters were often brutally attacked, tortured, raped, and murdered by insurgents as a result of their affiliation with Americans. Hence, when I looked for Iraqi female interpreters to participate in my research, I found it extremely difficult for them to reveal to me their affiliation with the US Army. Although I got in contact with two female interpreters, I was unsuccessful in persuading them to participate in my study. The absence of Iraqi female interpreters’ testimonies in my research, therefore, is a gap that I could not bridge.

The gender limitation was accompanied by a limitation in recruiting Iraqis of diverse religious and ethnic identities. It was impolite to ask my informants about their religious and ethnic identities. However, after interviewing them I easily recognized their identities from their
hometowns in Iraq, dialects, and sometimes their names. All my informants are Muslims: five of them are Muslim Shia and one is a Muslim Sunni, whereas there were actually a few Christian and other non-Muslim interpreters who worked for the US military in Iraq. In addition, all my informants are Arabs. I could not recruit Kurd informants or informants from other minorities. These seemingly significant gaps, while reflecting on the challenge of recruiting a diverse range of informants, ethnic groups, and religious affiliations, is reflective of the actual gender and ethnic composition of Iraqi interpreters on the ground.

Obtaining comprehensive information through my interviews of interpreters was not possible. Given the voluntary nature of their participation and the complexities of the topic, my participant interpreters were very careful not to compromise the security of their lives, their legal status, or confidential and restricted security records in the US by inadvertently exposing sensitive or classified information. Hence, the nature of the information that they were willing to provide me, and what I present in my thesis, is information that is appropriate for public review.

The interviews were conducted through face-to-face and phone-call conversations. Since some of my interviewees have arrived to America in 2007 and 2008, I tried to refresh their memories about their experiences by having initial and casual conversations about the topic whenever possible. I sent the research questionnaire to my interviewees and asked them for feedback as well. By the time of the actual interviews, my participants became prepared to engage themselves eagerly in the conversations. All the interviews were conducted in Arabic and I later translated the conversations into English. To protect their identities and privacy, I have used pseudonyms for my interviewees. For this purpose, I chose generic Arabic names that do not indicate a sectarian identity: Abdul, Firas, Hadi, Kamal, Noor, and Wadi. In addition, to
ensure my interviewees’ safety, I do not refer to specific places where they operated, where they lived in Iraq, or where they currently reside in the United States.

The process of recruiting US officials and veterans of Iraq was less challenging. I was fortunate to study with two faculty members at BGSU who, after discussing with them my project, happened to have a network of acquaintances of US veterans who served in Iraq. Hence, they were very supportive in putting me in contact with at least one US official who served as an executive officer to General David Petraeus, the Commanding General of the Multi-National Force in Iraq, and three other veterans including one female soldier who served as an Arabic linguist. Although the risks involved are much more unlikely than with Iraqi interpreters, I prefer to use pseudonyms for US veterans whom I interviewed to protect their privacy. I will refer to US veterans as: Paul Marco, a US Colonel who served in Iraq in two tours 2003-2004 and 2007-2008 and who served as an executive officer to General David Petraeus; Baker Harry, a US military Captain who served in Iraq for fifteen months in 2006-2007; Aaron Jason, a US Lieutenant who served in Iraq during the initial invasion in March 2003 through November 2003. I was also successful in bringing a female voice to my study. Katie Warren, a US military Specialist who served as an Arabic linguist also from the initial invasion until February 2004, provided valuable insight into the role of native Iraqi interpreters.

The thesis will be informed by data from three available sources: my ethnographic research, US press coverage of the stories of the interpreters, and US government documents. In addition, the study will draw on several books written on the Iraq war. My ethnography will include interviews of both Iraqi interpreters and US military personnel who served in Iraq and worked closely with Iraqi interpreters.
My thesis consists of three chapters in addition to this introduction and a conclusion. Chapter 1 discusses in detail the US linguistic preparations for the Iraq war. It also focuses on the different categories of interpreters employed by the US Army and the recruitment process of local Iraqi interpreters. Chapter 2 examines the expanded roles local Iraqi interpreters played to assist the US military in Iraq. It addresses interpreters’ motivations to work with the US Army in Iraq and evaluates the challenges of US troop operations without interpreters. I argue that local Iraqi interpreters were the “unknown soldiers” of the US occupation of Iraq due to their invaluable services and sacrifices. Chapter 3 focuses on the critical status that local Iraqi interpreters experienced in Iraq as a result of their work with the US Army and their immigration experience to the US. The chapter examines the risks interpreters underwent and the strategies they followed to survive. It also traces the emergence of a sense of US moral obligation to protect Iraqi interpreters which resulted in the passage of Special Immigration Legislations passed by Congress to resettle some of them in the US. Finally, the chapter also evaluates interpreters’ experience of adjustment in the United States.
CHAPTER I

LINGUISTIC PREPARATIONS AND THE IRAQ WAR

American leaders took their country to war ignorant of information available to anyone with a library card. The U.S. administration was not only significantly underequipped linguistically, but policy makers seemed unaware that a massive communications problem would exist once they seized a foreign society where English was not a commonly spoken language.1

The United States military plans for the 2003 invasion of Iraq might have prepared well for the mass displacement of civilians and refugees, the potential use of chemical attacks, and environmental disasters. They, however, did not adequately prepare for the Arabic linguistic support for the war. The lack of proper linguistic preparation for the Iraq war is one dimension of the larger failure to prepare for the war’s aftermath. Immediately after the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, the lack of linguistic preparation for the US invasion of Iraq emerged as a serious challenge for the US military, intelligence, and diplomatic missions in Iraq. It eventually resulted in the US depending significantly on local Iraqis work as interpreters and translators to meet the linguistic needs of the American military in Iraq.

US policy makers appear to have miscalculated the importance of and the immense need for linguistic support that emerged after the invasion of Iraq. As Dr. Paul Marco, a US Colonel who served in Iraq in two tours 2003-2004 and 2007-2008 and assumed the position of the executive officer to General David Petraeus, the Commanding General of the Multi-National Force in Iraq, noted:
I think initially the vision of the Bush administration was not an occupation of Iraq. They thought forces would be there for maybe a matter of few months, and then turn the government over to Iraqi exiles. They brought them to the country, and then we will leave. So that the idea that we have to work with Iraqis down the lowest level of the military that we will be there for a number of years as an occupying force, I think, was foreign to them. Therefore, the idea that our forces needed a lot of language training did not cross their minds.²

Emphasizing Dr. Marco’s opinion and according to my informants, the US Army poor linguistic preparation for the war was in quality and quantity. The US Army assigned a four -to seven-day course on cultural awareness to all US soldiers before sending them out to Iraq. In addition to introducing soldiers to key Arabic phrases, the course focused on teaching US soldiers basic cultural symbols and traditions of Iraq. During my interviews with four US veterans of Iraq, they agreed that the course they took was inadequate and some of them also noted that they forgot the few Arabic phrases they had learned by the time they arrived in Iraq. The one-week course, therefore, failed to create any practical language skills for US soldiers nor did it familiarize US soldiers with a different culture.

The first sign of the poor linguistic preparation appeared during the invasion itself. The US Army launched an Arabic-speaking Coalition Forces radio station during the invasion. Brief statements, for instance, urging Iraqis not to defend Saddam’s regime, and a few other statements by US top officials addressing Iraqis and translated into Arabic were presented by a few announcers who spoke terribly poor Arabic. The bad quality of the Arabic broadcasts disappointed enthusiastic pro-US Iraqis. The inability of the US Army to communicate
effectively with the Iraqi population contributed to the confusion in the Iraqi society about the actual reasons behind the US invasion.

The US Army did not provide troops with basic Arabic linguistic support that would have allowed them to function efficiently on the ground. In this respect, Katie Warren, a US veteran of Iraq who served as a linguist in the initial invasion in 2003, emphasized the lack of any linguistic preparations, she explains:

We did not even have signs that say stop. I thought it was ridiculous when setting up vehicle control checkpoints and US soldiers put up the sign somebody had drawn in English saying “stop” and we just expected vehicles to stop. They would shoot people who did not stop. You cannot expect people to speak English. Regular soldiers had not even been taught the most basic phrases like “hello,” “stop,” “put your hands up.” I mean the simplest things that would have made a big difference in the early stages. I could not believe we did not have these things prepared.³

The poor quality of linguistic support was compounded by the limited number of Arabic interpreters and bilingual US citizens in the US military. According to John Davis, a Major in the US Army, of the 140,000 US troops deployed to Iraq, only forty-two servicemen had Arabic language skills. Moreover, many of the forty-two did not speak the language intelligently.⁴ The claim is highly credible since the acquisition of Arabic language skills had been ignored in the United States until the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent “war on terror.” In this context, the US veterans, whom I interviewed, stressed the fact that they had rarely met US soldiers with Arabic language skills and further explained that some Arab-American soldiers who spoke Arabic had been ineffective in communicating with local Iraqis due to differences in dialects. Like the Army, the shortage of Arabic-speaking Americans operating in the US diplomatic mission and
intelligence service was immense. The US embassy in Baghdad, for example, had only three to four Arabic-speaking employees among its large number of staff.  

Despite the poor quality of the linguistic preparation and the limited quantity of trained personnel, the US government provided some linguistic support. A review of this linguistic support will clarify the major gaps in the US linguistic preparation for the Iraq war and subsequent occupation of Iraq.

Sources of Linguistic Preparation

I was still a student in the Language Defense Institute when the 9/11 attacks happened in the United States. The attacks changed the focus entirely and everybody knew that the need for Arabic was going to be growing and it would be a language increasingly in demand within the Department of Defense. (Katie Warren, A US citizen who served as an Arabic linguist in Iraq).

The major source of linguistic preparation for the Iraq war came from the language programs sponsored by the Defense Language Institute (DLI). The DLI was established by the US government in 1941 when the United States entered World War II. The institution is attached to the United States Department of Defense and has been responsible for providing linguistic and cultural services for the Department of Defense and other federal agencies. Historically, the DLI provided thousands of military linguists with skills in the Japanese language during World War II, Korean language skills during Korean War, and in the Vietnamese language during the Vietnam War. Similarly, the DLI provided a number of US soldiers with skills in Arabic for the Iraq war. My interviewee, Katie, is one of these soldiers who graduated from the DLI as an Arab linguist. She explains:
I planned to be an Army linguist and I joined the DLI in 2000. It was a sixty three-week course, about six to seven hours a day, and five days a week. At first, I had to take a test to see whether or not I qualified for a job where you would learn a language. It is called DLIB, Defense Language Aptitude Battery, and then your score in this test, if you passed it, determines what category of language would you (sic) get, and my grade determined that I would be an Arabic linguist.\(^7\)

The DLI provided excellent training in foreign languages, but it had its limitations with teaching Arabic. According to the Defense Language Institute evaluation, Arabic is classified as category IV along with Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Pashto, a language spoken in Afghanistan. Category IV denotes languages of the highest level of difficulty for English speakers to learn. Graduates of DLI were granted Associate degrees. The unusual complexity of Arabic discouraged students from pursuing it and consequently decreased the number of graduates in Arabic language. As a DLI graduate, Katie explains, “Arabic is not only different in writing system but also the grammatical structure is different from English which made it extremely difficult for us. My class was of 40 people, for instance, when it started but a lot of them freaked out because it was very challenging and I am not sure how many eventually graduated.”\(^8\)

This difficulty in learning Arabic, therefore, accounts for the observations that there were only a few Arabic-speaking Americans operating in Iraq. The other limitation was that the institute had focused on teaching Fusha, Standard Arabic, not the Iraqi dialect and on the written rather than spoken Arabic. Students had been required to learn a lot of the Arabic vocabulary and Arabic grammatical structures on a daily basis to enable them to translate written documents. For the spoken language, they were given “dialect familiarization” sessions where they were exposed
to several Arabic dialects such as the Iraqi dialect. According to Katie, these sessions were short and were not a very good introduction to the dialects.9 Thus, their unfamiliarity with various Iraqi dialect challenged the DLI graduates who, when sent out to work in Iraq, discovered they were unable to communicate properly with Iraqi people. It was only later on, around 2006 and over the course of the Iraq war, that changes were made that now include a focus on dialect training and on teaching Iraqi dialects separately from Standard Arabic.

The other means of linguistic preparation was the manufacturing of electronic devices to serve for translation and interpretation purposes in Iraq. The US Army in Iraq used two electronic devices: the Phraselator and the Voice Radio Translator (VRT). The Phraselator is a handheld computer (a 20 ounce, 31/2-by-7 inch device) that allows users to scroll through Arabic phrases. The users can then show the appropriate Arabic phrases to the people with whom they need to communicate. The US Army assigned $10 million to buy and distribute 5,000 Phraselators in Iraq.10 The VRT is a device that automatically interprets phrases in English into Arabic and can broadcast the translated phrases to listeners. The US Army initially distributed about 1,000 VRT in Iraq and then planned to increase their use due to their affordable price — $3000— each and the urgent need for interpreters.11

In Iraq, the two electronic devices proved to have severe limitations on the ground. The manufacturer of Phraselator, Vox Tec International Annaplois, Maryland., had already explained that the device was not ideal for a war zone.12 As to the VRT, developed by the Pentagon’s Defense Advanced Research Project Agency, it was intended to be used by police in law enforcement.13 In other words, the devices were not designed or equipped to operate in a culturally complex environment like Iraq. From my conversations with the Iraqi interpreters I have interviewed, the electronic devices ironically expanded the gap, in the early stages of the
invasion, between US soldiers and local Iraqis. The average Iraqis had not expected to have to communicate with US soldiers through a computer device. Most Iraqi civilians also were perplexed when US military vehicles rolled into their small streets broadcasting instructions in Standard Arabic. The image of foreign vehicles and soldiers with no human ability to communicate and explain things did not go down well with Iraqis who had experienced the horrors of war and dictatorship. Baker Harry, a US military Captain who served in Iraq for 15 months in 2006-2007, affirms this distancing effect of the Phraselator and the VRT. In my interview with him, Baker explained the disadvantages of using electronic devices:

I don’t know if the technology would really help. I don’t know if anything can really substitute for actual human to human interaction, like a translator who can understand and bridge that gap and get the question understandable for the other party, and capture meanings an electronic device can never capture. So, I think there is inherent limitation to technology when it comes to an environment like Iraq where the war is about community development as much as about war-fighting operations.14

In conclusion, the cultural awareness classes, Defense Language Institute programs, and the electronic devices proved inadequate to cover the immense need of the US Army and other US federal agencies in Iraq for interpretation and translation services.

Multi-Billion Contracts to Provide Linguistic Services

In order to convince people we care about them, we’ve got to understand their culture and show them we care about their culture . . . when somebody takes time to figure out how to speak Arabic, it means they are interested in somebody else’s culture. . . We need intelligence officers who when somebody says something in Arabic or Farsi or Urdu,
know what they are talking about.\textsuperscript{15} (President George W. Bush addressing university presidents in January 2006 at a State Department conference)

In the wake of the global war on terror after the 9/11 attacks, the United States realized the critical need for US citizens with skills in certain foreign languages, especially languages of the countries where the US Army is involved. Hence, US president George Bush stressed this national need and promised to allocate $114 million to expand the teaching of Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and Chinese as part of a federal program called the National Security Language Initiative.\textsuperscript{16} However, the plans to expand the teaching of Arabic and Urdu, a language spoken in Afghanistan could not meet the immediate need for interpreters and translators to operate in Iraq and Afghanistan. The United States Department of Defense, therefore, turned to and awarded multi-billion dollar contracts to private companies and corporations to provide translators and interpreters in Iraq.

In 2003, the Pentagon awarded a $174 million contract to Titan, a San Diego-based company established in 1981 that specialized in providing information and services for intelligence agencies. Under the contract, Titan was to provide translation and interpretation services not only for the US Army in Iraq but also for other US agencies and Multi-National Forces operating there. The contract dates back to 1999 when the US Army awarded a modest $10 million contract to BTG, a small business in Fairfax, Va., to provide about thirty Arabic linguists for the coalition forces in Kuwait.\textsuperscript{17} Titan bought the contract from BTG and was supposed to provide five years of services. The contract proved to be one of the most important and lucrative contracts in Titan’s history. Titan hired sub-contractors such as System Operation Station International to meet the growing and immediate need for interpreters. Although the contract earned Titan about $112.1 million, 6 percent of the company’s revenue in 2003, Titan
lost the contract in 2005 to L-3 Communication Company.\textsuperscript{18} The loss of the contract came after the Pentagon reviewed and evaluated Titan’s execution of the contract in the wake of news report that implicated several Titan’s interpreters in the Abu Ghraib scandal. These interpreters worked for US interrogators and at least one Egyptian-born US citizen interpreter was depicted in the Abu Ghraib photos.\textsuperscript{19} Other complaints about Titan were related to the inefficiency of its employees and its hasty recruitment of interpreters without adequate security checks being conducted.

In 2005, the Pentagon replaced Titan’s service and awarded the five-year contract of $4.65 billion to L3 Communication. In return, L3 Communication paid acquisition of $2.65 billion to Titan to win the contract.\textsuperscript{20} The Manhattan-based company, L3 Communication, was formed in 1997 and in a decade became the sixth-largest military contractor in the United States providing communication, surveillance, and navigation services. In addition to interpretation and translation services, L3 Communication had to provide intelligence services and private contractors. L3 Communication hired sub-contractors to execute the project, including Florida-based Espial Services, Virginia-based Gray Hawk Systems, Future Technologies Incorporated, a South Asian Company, and North Carolina-based Operational Support and Services.\textsuperscript{21} The contract generated about $600 million profit for L3 Communication in one year, about 5 percent of the company’s revenue.\textsuperscript{22} The lucrative contract, however, was soon submitted to reviews by the US Army which was concerned about the quality of the L3 Communication employees. According to news reports, the US Army also found that the company proposed a number of interpreters above the contract requirement in order for it to compensate the inconsistency and fluctuating availability of interpreters.
In December 2006, Global Linguist Solutions (GLS), instead of L3 Communication, was awarded a $4.65 billion linguist contract by the US Army. GLS, a Virginia-based joint-venture company which formerly served as a major subsidiary of L3 Communication, is headed by retired US Army Major General James Marks. Major Marks’s experience in this work came from his serving as the intelligence chief supervising the military’s Iraq Language Program in the wake of the invasion in 2003. The award was delayed by a dispute between L3 Communication and GLS over the contract when the former submitted many protests to the Government Accountability Office in order to maintain the contract. The dispute was resolved after a year when the two competing companies reached a subcontracting agreement in which L3 Communication obtained a subcontract from GLS. The company started to provide its services to the US Army and other agencies in Iraq by 2008, employing about 6,000 local Iraqi interpreters, most of whom were former employees of L3 Communication which had about 6,500 employees in Iraq and around 1,000 Americans fluent in Arabic and other languages spoken in Iraq. In addition to subcontracting with L3 Communication, GLS hired other smaller US companies such as Invizion, KMS Solutions, Tiger Swan, and Shee Aika Language. In 2009, the contract was once again submitted to scrutiny by the US Army Intelligence and Security Command which found that GLS had overspent five million dollars in the process of recruiting American linguists. However, GLS survived the scrutiny and continues to be the current provider of interpreters and translators in Iraq.

These major contracts with Titan, L3 Communication, and GLS provided local Iraqi interpreters and translators mostly for US combat forces in Iraq. In addition, the United States hired other companies to provide US-citizen interpreters and linguists with high security clearance. SOS International, for instance, was awarded a contract to provide Arabic linguists
and role-playing (military orientation exercises) support to the US Air Force Office of Special Investigation in order to help train the US Air Force for missions before deployment to Iraq. Other companies such as L-3 Linguist Operations and Technical Support won contracts to provide linguists for the US intelligence community. The availability and recruitment of US-citizen interpreters and linguists were different from the process of hiring local Iraqi interpreters as they were classified in different categories depending on many factors.

Categories of interpreters

Initially, the United States government encouraged the use of interpreters with US citizenship and security clearance at all levels of military, intelligence, and diplomatic missions in Iraq. The inclination to hire US citizens is increased when operating in a foreign country with complex and diverse relations. In Iraq, sectarian conflicts and precarious security conditions led to US concerns over the possibility that local Iraqi interpreters could be intimidated and blackmailed by conflicting political and sectarian parties. Hence, loyalty to the US and efficiency in interpretation become a critical issue, especially when it came to interpreters operating in sensitive intelligence and high political positions. Dr. Marco explained this when he pointed out:

In a perfect world, US soldiers would have their Arabic language capabilities . . . we wanted all interpreters with US citizenship but that we did not have enough of them, so we hired local Iraqi interpreters. We drew a line somewhere between where Iraqi interpreters and US interpreters could work. From Brigade level and higher we wanted interpreters to have security clearance because the issues at that level were complex. They were not only military in nature or security in nature; there was a lot of politics going on. Local interpreters would know more if they worked at that level.
According to *Counterinsurgency*, a manual published in December 2006 and conducted by General David Petraeus and General James Amos, General of US Marine Corps and Deputy Commandant, interpreters operating in Iraq are classified into three categories: Cat1, Cat2, and Cat3. The manual identifies Cat1 as follows:

Cat1 linguists usually are hired locally and require vetting. They do not have a security clearance. They are the most abundant resource pool; however, their skill level is limited. They should be used for basic interpretation for activities such as patrols, base entrance coverage, open source intelligence collection, and civil-military operations.²⁷

These local Iraqi interpreters also form the bulk of interpreters who support the US Army in Iraq and who play different roles in mediating between the US Army and Iraqis. The other two categories — Cat2 and Cat3 — include only US-citizen interpreters of different levels of secret clearance and tasks. The manual defines Cat2 linguists as “US citizens with a secret clearance. Often they possess good oral and written communication skills. They should be managed carefully due to limited availability.”²⁸ The top sensitive positions in the intelligence and US military are occupied by Cat3 interpreters. The manual defines them as, “US citizens with a top secret clearance. They are a scarce commodity and often retained at division and higher level of command. They have excellent oral and written communication skills.”²⁹ It is important to emphasize here that the majority of Cat2 and Cat3 were US citizens of Arab descent, either born in the US or naturalized.

In addition to these three categories, the US Army hired Third Nationality Interpreters (TNI). TNI, meaning not local Iraqi or US citizens, were most often Arab nationals who were recruited from Arab countries in the Middle East through special contracts to serve as interpreters in Iraq for a specific time. The TNI were inconsistently recruited depending on the
security conditions in Iraq and the availability of local Iraqi interpreters. Several Iraqi
interpreters I interviewed pointed out that the TNI increased in the worst years of the US
occupation of Iraq, especially in 2005, 2006, and 2007. The TNI were hired to compensate for
the shortage in the number of local Iraqi interpreters and were assigned to a low level of the US
military similar to that of Iraqi interpreters.

The three categories of interpreters are distributed to US military units with a different
number for each category, assigned to different military levels, and are paid very uneven salaries.
The local Iraqi interpreters, Cat1, have unique characteristics that other US and TNI interpreters
do not possess. As local Iraqis, they have numerous advantages, including: knowing Iraqi
dialects, colloquial and contemporary street conversation; comprehending the locals’ mindset;
knowing the local culture and traditions; the history and geography of different neighborhoods
and towns, and the ethnic composition and the politics of each neighborhood. Moreover, despite
the risks they face, they have a strong determination to help Iraq and Iraqis by working for the
US Army. These characteristics and advantages, which will be discussed in detail in chapter two,
qualified Iraqi local interpreters as Cat1 interpreters to work in positions that required immediate
interaction with local people. In other words, they worked with US military members who were
patrolling streets, searching homes, conducting civil affairs and community development
projects, and other similar tasks. These tasks were usually executed by the lower level of the US
military officials — battalion commanders, often lieutenant colonels, and lower-ranked military
level. As to the number of Cat1 interpreters assigned, the US Army aimed at having one
interpreter for each platoon, a platoon constituting of about 30 combat troops.30 The Army also
planned to have 30-40 Iraqi interpreters for a battalion — about 1,300 combat troops — and
maintain about 15 interpreters for surge operations.31 Taking the number of deployed US troops
in Iraq at anywhere between 140,000 and 176,000 at peak level of deployment, the US Army needed between 5,000 to 6,500 Iraqi interpreters. In addition to this number, a few thousand interpreters were recruited to serve with other Multi-National forces operating in the south of Iraq. The targeted number of interpreters assumed a stable cohort of interpreters. The reality, however, was that a great number of interpreters were unreliable since many kept quitting and coming back. Hence, the total number of Iraqi interpreters who were hired by the US Army was much larger than 6,000 in order to maintain the targeted number of 6,000 at any given time. These local interpreters were kept in “interpreter pools.” When a unit went on a mission, an interpreter would be assigned to this unit and usually the unit would continue working with the same interpreter.32

The local Iraqi interpreters were paid disparately according to the market, security conditions, and region of work. In the initial stage of the invasion, the local Iraqi interpreters were paid on a daily basis. Kamal, an Iraqi interpreter who worked with the US Army for six years from the initial weeks of the US occupation in 2003 until his immigration to America in 2009, explained to me that “at the beginning, it was more volunteering than real work. I offered to help the Forward Operating Base in my neighborhood in communicating with local people. They paid me $5 a day from what they called the unit’s pocket money.”33 According to Kamal, Titan started its linguistic contract, few months later, the interpreter’s salary was $450 a month in what was classified as safe regions such as the Shia Southern provinces and the Kurdish areas. For more insecure provinces like the Sunni provinces, Titan paid $600 a month. In addition, there was $150 bonus for interpreters who operated in risky tasks such as patrolling and raids.34 This range of salaries continued from 2003 until 2005 when there was relative availability of interpreters. The deterioration of the security conditions in Iraq by the end of 2004 affected the
interpreters’ market drastically. Many interpreters quit their work and the number of potential applicants for the job greatly decreased. Titan and other recruiting companies therefore started to pay its Iraqi interpreters $1200 a month in most regions from 2006-2009. There were exceptions and special offers when there was a shortage of interpreters during a specific time or in a certain region. Wadi, an Iraqi interpreter who worked for the US Army intermittently through several years, notes:

The standard of how much we got had depended on how many interpreters were there in a given time and how many Titan needed. During the Falluja battle in 2004, for example, Titan offered a good bonus for interpreters to work there and similarly during the Basra battle with the Shia militias in 2008 there was a short-term offer of up to $10,000 a month for interpreters who were willing to interpret for combat troops there. In average times, the salary ranged from $600-$1,200.\(^{35}\)

According to the counterinsurgency manual, the Cat2 interpreters, US citizens with secret security clearance, worked for battalion and higher level commanders or tactical human intelligence teams. Each Brigade, constituting of 3,000 to 5,000 combat troops, was supposed to have ten to fifteen Cat2 interpreters. The ten to fifteen interpreters are delegated thus:

They break down to one linguist for the brigade commander, one for each infantry battalion commander, and approximately ten linguists for the supporting military intelligence company. Of those ten, three translate for each tactical human intelligence team or operation management team, and two translate for each signals intelligence collection platform.\(^{36}\)

The number of Cat2 interpreters accordingly should have ranged between 300 and 500 to meet the need of 150,000 US combat troops in Iraq. As to Cat3 interpreters, US citizens with a
top secret clearance, there has been no source of their exact number. However, they were seldom and apparently fewer than other categories. Cat3 worked for the highest level of the US military, intelligence, and diplomatic missions. As I have noted earlier in this chapter, the linguistic contracting companies planned to hire about 1,000 interpreters with US citizenship. It is well-documented, however, that the targeted number was not achieved for two main reasons. First, many Arab Americans opposed the US occupation of Iraq and, consequently, they have been unwilling to support the invading forces, and, second, many positions required top secret clearance that was difficult for US citizens of Arab descent to obtain.

The salary of US interpreters with top secret clearance was exceptional and tempting. Among other privileges, upon singing the contract, the US interpreters of Cat2 and Cat3 received at least $10,000 a month, as much as ten times the wage of Iraqi interpreters. Some other contracts paid up to $200,000 a year for US interpreters in Iraq.

Finally, the Third Nationality Interpreters are not well-documented as to their numbers but, according to my interview with Sean, an Iraqi interpreter who worked from 2006-2008, “they were few in number. I would say four to five in the camp I worked for while we had around 200 local interpreters.” The TNI formed less than 5% of the interpreters and were hired to back up the number of Cat1 interpreters. They worked with the same level of US military that Cat1 Iraqi interpreters worked for and they performed similar tasks to Iraqi interpreters as well. They received about $2,000 a month, a little higher than what their fellow local Iraqi interpreters received. The limitations of US-citizen interpreters of Cat2 and Cat3 as well as TNI will be discussed further in Chapter two and will be compared with the strengths of local Iraqi interpreters.
Recruitment Process

There was immediate need for interpreters once we got to Baghdad. A lot of people in Baghdad were looking for work after the invasion so we hired them quickly and started to pay them from the unit’s pocket in cash. When we first hired them it was out of necessity. We did not have an English test to give them and we did not have enough time to come up with one. It was more like: can you speak English? Yes. Do you want to work for us? Yes. Ok, you are hired.43 (US Lieutenant Aaron Jason).

As I describe in the introduction, Iraq is a multilingual society with several languages and many local dialects. The major spoken languages are Arabic and Kurdish. In addition, Turkmen and Aramaic are minor languages spoken especially in villages in the northern provinces of Mosul and Kirkuk. The Saddam regime policy of Arabization resulted in an overwhelming majority of Iraqis — including Kurds, Turkmens, Chaldeans, and other non-Arabic speakers in Iraq — learning Arabic. As to Arabic Iraqi dialects, Iraqis speak Baghdadi, Maslawi, Bedouin, and other local dialects. The differences between the Arabic dialects, however, do not impede mutual comprehension and an Iraqi can easily communicate with other Iraqis whatever different local dialects they speak. Given that Arabic Iraqi was spoken by most Iraqis, the bulk of the interpreters in demand by the US Army were bilingual in Arabic and English.

The recruitment of local Iraqi interpreters can be featured in three distinct stages. The first stage was spontaneous and represented the linguistic ill-preparation for the invasion of Iraq. It continued from the initial days of the invasion to several months after. The US military units in each town, village, and neighborhood started to hire any bilingual Iraqi who was willing to work. From my interviews with interpreters, I gathered that accidental encounters and communicating with US troops were the only process through which they were hired by the US Army. Noor is
an Iraqi interpreter who worked for about a year and a half from the initial weeks of the US occupation until he had a fatal attack and lost a limb while patrolling with the US Army. Noor recalls the context of his employment and says:

My neighborhood was bombarded during the war and many bombs stayed unexploded for a while. When Baghdad was eventually invaded, the US soldiers made their way to these unexploded bombs to diffuse them. They needed somebody, first, to guide them to these bombs, and, second, to facilitate their communication with local people. I helped whenever I was there. Americans were impressed by my fluent English and were thankful for my help. Then, they started to knock at my door whenever they needed to speak with Iraqis in my neighborhood and finally they invited me to work with them.44

The second stage was represented by an organized recruitment process conducted by Titan. By the time the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) took over in Iraq in April 2003, the previous complex of Saddam’s palaces, the Green Zone, provided a safe haven to US missions including US contracting companies. Shortly afterward, Titan made its headquarter in the Green Zone and started recruiting Iraqis to work as interpreters. Meanwhile, the re-building Iraq campaign was launched with multi-billion dollars invested in numerous bids, contracts, and projects by US giant companies such as Halliburton, KBR, Security Companies, and many private contractors. The US diplomatic mission and these giant companies and contracts created immediate job opportunities for hundreds of bilingual Iraqis, especially holders of higher degrees, offering them decent positions with decent paychecks. Hence, Titan lost out in hiring a significant number of professional bilingual Iraqis.

In the summer of 2003 Titan opened its recruiting centers for interpreters throughout Iraq. The main center was located in the Green Zone in Baghdad, and it stayed there from 2003 until
GLS took over the recruitment in 2008. Gradually, Titan opened regional centers in northern Iraq in Mosul, Sulymania, and Diyala and the southern region in Basra, Halla, Najaf and Nasseryia. The multiple centers recruited not only interpreters who were bilingual in Arabic and English but also bilingual in Kurdish and English and sometimes trilingual in Arabic, Kurdish, and English. Due to the concentration of US troops in the Arabic-speaking areas and its nominal presence in the Kurdish regions of Iraq, the need for bilingual interpreters in Arabic and English was much greater than the demand for Kurdish/English bilinguals. Most Kurds and Turkmens, in addition, spoke Arabic although they used their ethnic languages in their regions. Two of the US veterans I interviewed worked in the Kurdish and Turkmen regions and hired Kurdish interpreters.

It took Titan several months to organize the recruitment process of Iraqi interpreters. Through a network of interpreters who spread the word and through advertisements for jobs in the Coalition Newspaper Baghdad at a Glance, applicants found their way to Titan’s office, which was run by Americans and Arab Americans, in the Green Zone to sign up for interpreters’ jobs. The US military bases as well started to refer interested bilinguals to Titan rather than hiring them immediately. To be recruited, applicants had to pass an English test and a security screening. Abdul, an Iraqi interpreter who worked for six years for the US Army, from 2003 to 2009, explained the way he signed up for the job:

Through 2003, the recruitment was massive. I waited with tens of other applicants to take an English test. After I passed the English test, I was sent to Camp Victory in Baghdad Airport to submit to a “security screening.” It was processed through two stages: an interview with an Iraqi American and an interview with an American. Both asked a list of questions. The final thing was that they took my fingerprints, photograph of my face, and other information. After the security screening interview was finished, it took a few
weeks before I received notification that I was security cleared. Then, I had to sign a contract in which I stated that I would submit to a polygraph test, from time to time. The contract had an item stating the compensation of about $10,000 to my family in case I was killed.45

L3 Communication took over the recruitment process in 2005. The company maintained Titan’s former interpreters and followed a similar process of recruitment as well.46 The three years, 2005-2008, where L3 Communication provided its services, witnessed the peak of violence and chaos in Iraq and consequently the company faced great challenges in maintaining the required number of interpreters for the US Army and Multi-National Forces. In addition to advertising jobs for interpreters in many places, L3 Communication encouraged Iraqi interpreters to help in attracting other potential interpreters and paid them a bonus of $50-$150 for every new interpreter they recruited.47

By the time GLS took charge of the supply of interpreters in 2008, drastic changes had taken place. Above all, the level of violence had decreased throughout Iraq with an increasing number of people supporting the Iraqi government and opposing the insurgency and terrorist groups. GLS moved out its recruitment centre and headquarters from the Green Zone to a residential area located in West Baghdad. The improvement of security conditions was reflected in the availability of interpreters. Wadi, during my interview with him, noted that there was an apparent difference in the recruitment procedures between 2003 and 2008, He explained:

When I applied again in the summer of 2008, there were hundreds of applicants standing in two lines — a men’s and women’s line. Maybe it was the first time since 2003 that there was not immediate hiring and there were limited options and vacancies. I took an English test that was different from Titan’s 2003 test. This time the test was both a
written and a verbal test and it was more oriented to focus on military language skills. The security screening was the same as Titan’s, and there was a health examination which was new to the recruitment process. In addition to language capabilities, interpreters with other skills such as skills in computer and technology, administration, and electronics were preferred.\textsuperscript{48}

In 2009 Iraqi interpreters became widely available. At the end of 2008, Iraq and the United States signed the “US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement” which stipulated the gradual withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq, first, with forces being pulled from cities by June 2009 and, then, forces being completely withdrawn from Iraq by December 2011. The need for local interpreters, therefore, apparently went down. The new applicants stayed on waiting lists for months in the hope that they would be contacted when vacancies became available. Abdul quit his job as an interpreter at the beginning of 2009 explaining to me that:

Where once I was a much desired commodity, with the troops withdrawing and more US military bases closing, it was apparent that I was going to be laid off because there was not much to do; rare patrolling, much fewer missions, and fewer troops. In fact, GLS started recently to lay off extra interpreters and decreased our salaries to $800 a month. Again, the flourishing time for our work was from 2003-2008.\textsuperscript{49}

It is important to note that in addition to the US Army, recruiting companies provided interpreters for multi-national forces operating in the southern parts of Iraq. The British Army in Basra initially numbered up to 46,000 troops but after the invasion only 8,500 of them were stationed in Iraq. It hired about 2,000 Iraqis within four years of whom hundreds were interpreters.\textsuperscript{50} The Australian forces, consisting of 2,000 military members, needed Arabic/English interpreters as well. In addition, Titan recruited interpreters who were bilingual in
Arabic and other languages in order to operate with other multi-national forces. Although some nations withdrew a part of their troops shortly after the invasion in 2003, they needed hundreds of Iraqi interpreters. In the initial invasion, the number of participating troops of the Multi-National forces was as following: Spanish, 1,300; Dutch, 1,345; Italian, 3,200; Ukraine, 1,650; Poland, 2,500; Danish, 400; and other smaller military missions from other nations. Since they were hired by Titan, Iraqi-affiliated multi-national forces interpreters received approximately the same salary that US-affiliated Iraqi interpreter received.

Throughout the time from 2003-2009, the recruitment of local interpreters, whether by Titan, L3 Communication, or GLS, was flawed. The most notable disadvantages were the ethnic composition of the interpreters and the inadequate English skills of some of them. As I highlighted in the introduction, Arab Shias and Kurds were the most persecuted ethnic groups under Saddam Hussein’s regime. Hence the Shias and Kurds welcomed the US invasion and further supported the US Army. When I asked him about the ethnic composition of interpreters, Dr. Marco pointed out:

The bulk of them were Shias and Kurds. It does not mean Shia and Kurdish interpreters had political agendas. It means the other side, mostly Sunnis, was upset with the way Saddam was deposed, so because of that they did not want to work with Americans or they were intimidated by their own community not to work with the Americans.51

The reality of not having a diverse group of ethnic and sectarian interpreters interfered with and further confused the US Army’s missions in numerous situations. The sectarian biases sometimes accompanied interpreters during their work. The fact, for example, that the US Army hired Shia and Kurd interpreters to operate in Sunni regions and had used them to interpret during interrogation of Sunni detainees proved problematic. According to Dr. Marco, there were
situations when interpreters deliberately misinterpreted the conversation in order to advance their own sectarian interest and disadvantage the other sect. He noted:

They could actually work against our mission. Let’s say we had a Shia interpreter who did not like Sunnis and he worked in a Sunni area and in terms of his making up things rather than interpreting what people were saying. For example, he would tell Americans “oh, that is a Baathist and a bad guy,” and he could tell the locals false things. Like the US commander may say “we are here to make sure that terrorists don’t intimidate you” and that could come across when interpreted by a Shia to a Sunni as “the Americans are here to break in to your home, rape your daughters and steal your money” and Americans don’t know what the interpreter is saying.\(^5\)

Finding out the motivation of the interpreter, Dr. Marco added, was very crucial to ensure that the interpreter had translated the conversation accurately. It did not take the US Army a long time to discover the interpreter’s own sectarian agendas or biases when soon Americans started to comprehend the complexity of Iraqi society. Overtime, the US Army sometimes monitored potential sectarian-biased interpreters by using another interpreter and by tape recording and checking the accuracy of the interpretation.\(^5\)

The interpreters’ ethnic biases were interjected in their work as well. In this respect, most interpreters performed differently when operating in their own ethnic community than in other different ethnic communities. The problem was especially notable in Mosul and Kirkuk where Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and other communities co-existed. Operating in the ethnically heterogeneous city of Mosul, Baker Harry explains:

As he has a Kurdish background, my Kurdish interpreter, Steve, was rather soft whenever we dealt with the Kurdish community and potential Kurdish targets. He intended to be
overly accommodating to a Kurdish guy we were trying to chase. During the interaction if we were very sure that he was bad, Steve would say no, and try to soften the whole thing up. While when we dealt with the Arab community in Mosul, he tended to be more aggressive. I think it is important to understand an interpreter’s background because where the interpreter’s sympathies lie would color the information he was going to give me.\textsuperscript{54}

The ethnic and sectarian composition also limited the effectiveness of local interpreters. Since Iraq has vast and varied landscapes, each region, town, and city has its own local flavor. While operating with the US Army, interpreters from one geographical part of Iraq might not be familiar with the history, geography, and politics of another part which made them lose the advantage of locality. In addition, the interpreter’s ethnic and sectarian identity determined a great part of people’s reaction toward him and consequently toward the US mission with which he was operating. It was apparent, however, that the recruiting companies cared only for the language capabilities of interpreters rather than the ethnic and sectarian considerations. Working with ethnically diverse interpreters, Baker Harry notes:

It is one of the points we were too naïve to understand, that interpreters came from different parts of Iraq and maybe a specific interpreter would not go along with other ethnic communities, or the community did not go along with the interpreter because he is from a different part of Iraq. I wish I had that flexibility to take the ethnic variety of interpreters into considerations when operating in an ethnically various city like Mosul. I am sure tense moments happened between people and my interpreters, but it is tough to understand people’s gestures to that, and I did not have the language capabilities either.\textsuperscript{55}
Local interpreters also would sometimes find even their linguistic competence to be inadequate when they operated in ethnic communities that spoke different language from theirs. Bringing his interpreters over from Baghdad, Aaron Jason’s unit in Mosul had to deal with four ethnic communities with four different languages. However, the spread of Arabic in these communities helped. Jason explains:

Three of my interpreters were Kurds from Baghdad. They spoke Kurdish and Arabic but in Tell Affar in Mosul they could not understand people (when they spoke with each other) because people spoke the Turkmen language. People of Tel Affar also spoke Arabic and that was how we communicated. It was not that big of a problem, but we would prefer if the interpreter was somebody who could also understand people when they spoke to each other.56

The second notable disadvantage of the recruitment process of local Iraqi interpreters was the hiring of people with inadequate English skills. In a war-torn country, Iraqi society lived in isolation from the world and under Saddam Hussein’s totalitarian rule. The regime deprived Iraqis from travel opportunities, whether for study or tourism purposes, by imposing exorbitant fees for travel documents. In addition, the regime banned modern communication means such as the internet service, cell phones, and satellite channels. Hence, Iraqis’ foreign language skills notably deteriorated. In this respect, Ali Allawi, an Iraqi former exile who served as minister of Finance after the US occupation of Iraq, points out:

Language was also a serious problem. The decades of wars and sanctions had brought about a drastic diminution of linguistic standards at Iraq’s universities and technical colleges. By the time of the invasion, the only fluent English-speaking Iraqi engineers and technocrats were those in their fifties and sixties who had been trained abroad and
had maintained their language skills. The subsequent generation had poor or non-existed language skills.\textsuperscript{57}

Although the recruitment process included a written English test, the spoken and listening skills of the applicants, which were more significant than the written skills for the work they were engaged in, were not tested. Hence, the local interpreters sometimes found themselves unable to understand what the Americans were saying and unable to communicate the conversation properly. It is not to claim that the local interpreters did not have the language capability, but they struggled in terms of understanding American speech (idioms and accents) and in terms of using appropriate and comprehensible vocabulary when interpreting. Having studied for a Bachelor’s degree in English Literature, Wadi explains to me the linguistic challenges of working with the US troops:

\begin{quote}
It was very difficult and embarrassing for me in the first weeks of work. I acquired my English from literary books and I did not have exposure to the American accent. Hence, I could not understand from the first time and I always asked soldiers to repeat the sentences and with a slower tone. As to the speaking challenge, my commander told me that my English interpretation was rather poetic and improper to the military environment.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Wadi was fortunate to work with a military unit that offered him some kind of dialect training. During slow times of the day, Wadi’s commander invited him to watch American movies explaining to him any difficulty regarding terms. This issue regarding American speech became more challenging because the deployed units came from different states of America. Kamal worked with numerous military units and in my interview with him, he suggests:
I think my English was enough for the kind of work I did. But the American dialect was challenging because all the spoken English I had heard was British from the BBC. In fact, it took me a year and a half of work to overcome the dialect barrier. In addition, every military unit came from a different state and had a different accent. For example, Southerners from Austin did not pronounce the “r” sound, and other States pronounce the “r” everywhere in the speech, so I had to learn the accent of each unit I worked with. In addition to the challenge of understanding the American dialect, three of the interpreters I interviewed reported that they had struggled with understanding military terminology and abbreviations. With his medical background, Abdul explained to me that he first misunderstood Company, a military unit of 100-200 troops, as a business firm and he needed illustrations for words like private, squad, magazine, and roger. Similarly abbreviations like ECP (Exit Checkpoint), SI (Secret Information), IED (Improvised Explosive Device), and other numerous abbreviations made the conversation more difficult to understand.

The US soldiers sometimes complained about the poor English skills of some of their local interpreters as well. In this respect, Dr Marco suggested, “Some of them lacked proficiency in English. In general, the Iraqi local interpreters knew their Arabic better, but their English was pretty spotty at times. The other thing was that we were never quite sure whether what you were telling them had been processed correctly and how it came out in Arabic”. According to Baker Harry it was very frustrating to have an inefficient interpreter:

It was confusing. We went in a mission to speak with some locals and I asked my interpreter to ask them where the insurgents came from: outside Mosul or what neighborhood they came from, so we can deal with them. The interpreter talked with the locals for five minutes and turned back to me and said, “Sir, there is a market half a mile
down the road,” I looked at him and asked him what was the question I asked you to ask them, and then he gave me a blank stare. One of the Iraqis there looked at me and said in English, “your interpreter has no idea what he is doing, he can’t ask the question you asked these people and I don’t think he speaks English. 63

Despite the fact that there were some local interpreters with limited English skills, all of the US veterans I interviewed stressed that many local interpreters had excellent English proficiency and that the others improved their skills over time. The Iraqi interpreters I interviewed argued that the key strength they had was not their English skills but rather in their being Iraqis and knowing their native Iraqi dialect. They supported their arguments with numerous stories and situations that explained their roles in assisting the US Army in Iraq, which will be discussed in chapter two.

To conclude, the United States invaded Iraq in 2003 with insufficient Arabic linguistic preparations. The linguistic challenge in dealing with a foreign people was compounded by the deficiencies of the limited preparations whether in the cultural awareness classes, DLI program, and electronic devices were used on the ground. The small number of trained interpreters and translators worsened the situation, leading the US government to turn to contractors to provide translation services. The contracting companies provided the US Army and the multi-national forces in Iraq with three categories of interpreters including US citizens, local Iraqis, and third nationality interpreters, categorized according to their citizenship status and level of security clearance. Finally, the procedures of recruiting local interpreters changed over the years, and became more selective and competitive by the time the US Army started to pull out troops and to prepare for total withdrawal from Iraq.
CHAPTER II
THE ROLES OF IRAQI INTERPRETERS

*The Most Loyal Iraqis*

I came across them in every city: the young man in Mosul who loved Metallica and signed up to be a translator at a U.S. Army base; the DVD salesman in Najaf whose plans to study medicine were crushed by the Baath Party favoritism, and who offered his services to the first American Humvee that entered the city . . . . [and] Ahmed, a tall, handsome Kurdish Shiite who lived just outside Sadr City, and who was obsessed with Iraqi politics.¹

In discussing the experience of local Iraqi interpreters who worked with the US Army in Iraq, it is necessary to start first by addressing the reasons for their decision to serve as interpreters. These reasons and motivations inform the subjective experiences of my informants as well as provide a context for the recruitment, service, and US immigration experience of Iraqi interpreters in general. Although my Iraqi informants had various personal reasons for serving with the US military, my ethnography reveals that there were common motivations shared by interpreters. Moreover, my interviews with US veterans of Iraq had also affirmed these motivations.

Money and the desire to find a job were obvious reasons for Iraqis to sign up as interpreters with the US military. However, there were also many other reasons. Abdul, for instance, was forced to drop out of his medical studies when he went to jail because he was falsely accused of being involved in banned political activities. The experience left Abdul feeling betrayed and he was determined to do his best to change the system that persecuted him and to save other people the pain of experiencing such injustice:
I was asked this question when I first applied for the job, and I replied that I wanted to serve my people and my country. I liked to be introduced to American culture by working for Americans and I needed money. As I was doing a critical job, I started to feel it was a moral responsibility to believe in the cause of building a new Iraq despite the risks. My belief in the cause and my love for my country greatly outweighed the money.²

Indeed, most interpreters expressed feelings of patriotism. Noor noted that he felt he had to do the job out of a sense of duty and necessity. He explained:

If guests come over to your home, you will be attentive, on one hand serving them and, on the other hand, ensuring that everything is going all right in your home. My neighborhood in Baghdad is also my home. I grew up playing soccer on its streets and I went to schools here. Hence, when foreign soldiers came over to Baghdad, I would not spare any effort to help my people when they needed interpreting instructions to stay away from unexploded bombs or when they needed to know what to do when Americans searched their homes.³

Similarly, Kamal stated that it was the first time in his life when he had a word in what was going on in Iraq. Being a Shia, the job empowered Kamal after decades of marginalization. Kamal points out, “I was an outsider during Saddam’s reign. I became a part of my community and became an active Iraqi only when I worked with the US Army.”⁴ In addition, the US veterans I interviewed shared with me similar stories of interpreters’ desires to help their people and country. Captain Baker Harry was struck by the interpreters’ bravery:

I think they were very brave and the most loyal Iraqis. From my conversation with Iraqis, everyone told me about electricity, running water, jobs, and a better future for Iraq. They dreamt of rebuilding Iraq, and they told me what America had done for Kuwait after 1991
and they wanted the same for Iraq. But, they were not willing to go out and risk themselves for it. That meant being quiet where Al-Qaeda was operating in their neighborhoods because they were afraid that if they said something their families or friends would be killed, and I can understand that. But why I think Iraqi interpreters were the most loyal to Iraq was because they understood all the risks. They understood that there is a dream for making Iraq a better place with a good future for their families, and they were willing to go out and risk their lives for it. I cannot think of anything more selfless or more loyal to their country than that act of service.\textsuperscript{5}

The second common reason for Iraqis to work as interpreters was money. The decent salary was an essential motivation in a country where state employees before the occupation made the equivalent of five dollars a month and where unemployment was a dire problem\textsuperscript{6}. Hence, interpreting for the US Army offered a wonderful economic opportunity for many Iraqis. Firas, a graduate of English who intermittently served as an interpreter with the US Army, sought the job for money. He explains:

I am from a village farming community to the south of Baghdad. After I graduated from college, I could not find a job. When my family only income came from our poor farm, the equivalent of $150-$200 a month, I felt I had no excuse not to capitalize on my English skills and make money out of it. My first paycheck with the US Army was $810 which was a jump in my family’s income. Within a few months in my work, we could afford to buy furniture and expand our home by constructing new rooms so that my older brother would be able to get married.\textsuperscript{7}

In addition to their aspiration to serve their country and their need for jobs, the idea of working with Americans seemed exotic to many Iraqis, since the decades of isolation made them
eager to mix with foreigners and to travel abroad. Wadi has never traveled abroad or at least had an opportunity to practice his English with native speakers, a fact that encouraged him to sign up to be an interpreter. He suggested:

In the first weeks of the invasion, Iraqis had enormous curiosity. I have always watched Americans and their life through Hollywood movies and the *Friends* series, and I have studied about them in books, so that working with them was the first chance for me to see Americans in reality. We spent hours having interesting conversations and correcting misconceptions about each other. It was also the best way for me to improve my English skills since I was a student at the English Department.⁸

According to Wadi, it was a combination of many reasons that encouraged him to work as an interpreter:

During summers, it usually reached over 130 degrees Fahrenheit in Baghdad and without having electricity on, it was unbearable. The US base, hence, provided me with an exceptionally convenient place. After I finished my work, I spent my day in a caravan with air conditioning on twenty-four hours a day, and played video games or watched movies with some American friends. I also had free of charge access to the gym and the pool. The best thing was the “chow hall” where I had whatever food I liked, ice creams, desserts, and beverages. All of that in addition to $1,050 a month made it a good deal.⁹

Neither the curiosity, nor the paycheck was a reason for other interpreters. Coming from a privileged family and having a prestigious full-time job as a physician at a hospital in Baghdad, Hadi was not motivated by anything other than getting a visa to escape from Iraq. When Congress passed the Special Immigration Legislation at the end of 2006, Hadi was having the
worst time in his personal and professional life with the ethnic cleansing and unprecedented sectarian violence in Baghdad. He explained:

I have never thought of working as an interpreter with the military, but I was desperately looking for a way to escape from Iraq. The first day I started my job at the hospital, we received over 1000 causalities in the hospital. The causalities were Shia pilgrims who were marching on Baghdad streets and were attacked. From then on we used to receive at least 100 causalities in the emergency room on a daily basis. Most of them were severely injured; distorted, and burnt. Imagine, I lived with that for a year and that drove me crazy. In addition to that, we worked under the pressure of the Shia militia and the Sunni terrorist groups which worsened the situation.\(^{10}\)

Having friends and relatives who were serving as interpreters with the US Army and who encouraged him to do the same, Hadi sought the job specifically as a way to immigrate to the United States. Other interpreters, especially the ones who signed up for the job later and after the passage of the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program in 2006, saw the opportunity to immigrate to the US by becoming interpreters with the US military. These Iraqi interpreters, therefore, planned for their immigration to America which later helped them adjust quickly in the United States.

To conclude, Iraqis took tremendous risks to serve as interpreters with different motivations. A combination of patriotism and a desire to build a new Iraq, the need for money, their curiosity to experience a foreign culture, and finally their intention to immigrate to the US served to draw them into working with US forces in Iraq.
Invisible Interpreters: Iraqi Females

When the US military started to hire Iraqis as interpreters, they hired both males and females. There are no official statistics available about the gender of Iraqi interpreters employed by American military, but my informants, Iraqi interpreters and US veterans, pointed out that the number of female interpreters was fewer than males. Hadi, for example, said that in each US base he operated, there were a few female interpreters, and not more than one female in every ten interpreters.\textsuperscript{11} This limited number does not reflect a deliberate effort by the US military to employ more males, rather it reflects the difficulty to recruit Iraqi women as interpreters.

Many informants pointed out that it was extremely dangerous for an Iraqi woman to choose to work with the US military. The decision jeopardized a woman’s social status in her family and community since it appeared to violate social codes and traditional roles for women and could damage a woman’s reputation and honor.\textsuperscript{12} In one situation, Wadi expressed his resentment for the women he saw applying to sign up as interpreters describing some of them as “disrespectable.” “I wonder if some of them really come from respectful families. If they have fathers and brothers, how they will allow them to work with Americans. Some of them were really there to make a living and some were not.”\textsuperscript{13} He also recounts a story of a fellow female interpreter who was brutally beaten by her brother because she worked with the US military. Affirming the sensitivity and debate about female interpreters’ work, Kamal noted that most female interpreters were married or older single women; “I did not meet many single young female interpreters since they were careful not to risk their reputation and lose the chance to get married. It was usually some woman whose husband was also an interpreter or an older woman.”\textsuperscript{14}
Al Baghdadyia, an Iraqi satellite channel, broadcast a television drama series in 2010. One of the themes dealt with a narrative of an Iraqi female interpreter who had escaped from Iraq to Syria where she met an Iraqi man who wanted to marry her. The narrative described the complexity of women’s negotiations of traditional notions of honor and this female interpreter’s difficulty in explaining to the man she loved that she had worked as an interpreter with Americans, and how she feared that could affect his decision to marry her.

Iraqi women working with Americans were top targets for insurgents. Female interpreters were not only punished by death but also were sometimes kidnapped and raped. Janet Tu, Seattle Times reporter, interviewed Yousra Al-Ani who described the fears of female interpreters like herself: “A fellow translator was kidnapped, and within a week pictures of her body covered in bruises, eyes gouged out appeared on the internet . . . The only thing I was afraid of was kidnapping. Because you don’t know what they’ll do with you and your body afterward.” Other press reports also chronicle affirmed atrocities on Iraqi female interpreters. For example, Tina Susman reported that Hameeda was kidnapped on her way to work and her body was found in a trash dump next day after she was shot five times. Another female interpreter was shot execution-style at her home in front of her family.

Iraqi female interpreters sought the job for the same reasons as male interpreters. Yousra, a mother of three children, intended to provide for her family after her husband lost his job. While Rana and her sister Farah welcomed the US troops and the toppling of Saddam’s regime, “Rana and Farah saw the American invasion as a way to help the Iraqi people and sought to assist the United States by becoming interpreters.” I came across many cases, from press reports and from my informants’ stories, where female interpreters married Iraqi male interpreters. The opportunity to obtain independence, social and financial, and to have more
freedom to choose their partners could be another reason for Iraqi women to seek work as interpreters with the US military.

The limited number of Iraqi female interpreters was used by the US military to address sensitive areas in Iraqi society. For instance, female interpreters were used to communicate with Iraqi or to search Iraqi women. In this context, Katie, an American female interpreter, pointed out that Iraqi women responded positively to her presence “local women were usually outraged and scared to see male soldiers but I noticed that the fact I was a woman assured them.”20 However, female interpreters’ role was usually limited to on-base interpretation and translation duties. Since they operated in a conservative Arab and Muslim society in which women had a special status, the US military avoided taking Iraqi female interpreters on patrol or search missions to ensure it did not outrage locals or feed the tension. Iraqi female interpreters, therefore, provided critical services despite their invisibility to the public.

Spinning Your Wheels

Nothing could solidify the image of Americans as imperial occupiers more than teams of heavily armed soldiers with helmets and flack jackets careening around the country, unable to communicate, and seemingly uninterested in what the Iraqis thought, felt or wanted.21

For a nuanced understanding of the role Iraqi interpreters have played, it is important to contextualize the US military’s situation in Iraq when they were experiencing a shortage of interpreters or when operating without any interpreters at all. US troops could not function in Iraq without personnel with bilingual capabilities. The linguistic challenge was notable during the initial invasion, but it became greater when the war shifted towards a military occupation that
involved greater interaction with local Iraqis on a daily basis. Communication with locals and a deep comprehension of the local culture became a prerequisite to efficient functioning of the US forces in Iraq.

To begin with, the availability of Iraqi interpreters throughout the years following the invasion was unsteady and notably contingent upon security conditions in Iraq at a given time. According to the US veterans I interviewed, there was an enormous shortage of interpreters during the invasion and the first few months that followed. Dr. Marco noted:

There was a significant shortage which is why the military offered contracts to try to find US citizens who had the right language capabilities to come over and work with us in Iraq, and we paid them as contractors. What we did in my unit, we scoured the ranks to see if we can find folks who speak Arabic or spoke it at home and we did find one. He was Egyptian. He was originally enrolled in the Army as a Bradley mechanic. He spoke Egyptian dialect but he was good enough that he could communicate with Iraqis. We pulled him out of his job as a mechanic and put him in the battalion commander. 22

Throughout 2003 there was a concerted effort to hire Iraqis with language skills in English. By the end of 2003, the US Army had acquired a considerable number of interpreters and started to fill out the vacancies in a few bases. In his book, *Fiasco*, Ricks draws on his conversation with Robinson, a US Sergeant who served in two tours in Iraq, to point out the difference between the two deployments: “Robinson noted that every patrol he sent out included an interpreter, in contrast to the first year of the U.S. military presence . . . it’s a huge difference being able to communicate clearly instead of using hands signals and broken English.”23

However, the number of interpreters was inadequate and unreliable. At the beginning of 2004, the armed insurgency against the US occupation began, and security conditions deteriorated in
Iraq. Throughout 2004, insurgents and militants began killing interpreters as revenge for their collaboration with the US Army. Many interpreters were intimidated and quit their jobs, others were murdered, and consequently the number of potential applicants greatly decreased.

Woodward, in his book on the Iraq war, noted that during a visit to a camp in Falluja in 2004 Frank Miller, a National Security Council official, asked military commanders about their needs. Their response was unanimous:

The division commander with between 10,000 and 20,000 men and women said: translators. The bridge commander with several thousands said, translators. The battalion commanders with 600 to 800 troops: translators. Small teams or platoons were being sent to search homes, seal off areas, knock on and break down doors without translators who could speak Arabic.24

According to Woodward, Miller thought the shortage was unconscionable and informed officials in Washington about the situation when he returned. He discussed the issue with Lieutenant General Walter Sharp, the director of Strategic Plans and Policy, and with commandant of the Marine Corps as well as with the vice chief of staff of the Army. Finally Miller discussed the issue with Bush’s National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. Woodward further reports:

“Fix it” Rice said. Miller was to use his authority . . . Getting translators was hard; it could take years to train them; years they did not have. He decided the solution was to get the State Department to hold an international fair job for translators. It did not have to be in Iraq. They could go to Algeria or Morocco . . . Send them to Iraq, he thought, quarantine them at night inside a secure compound, take away their cell phones. Use
them for six months and send them home with a big bonus . . . Months later, the problem still had not been solved. It was now worse than a scandal, Miller thought.25

The absence of interpreters in Iraq paralyzed the functioning of the US troops, whether in collecting intelligence and information or in executing regular tasks. For example, my informant, Captain Baker, said he was involved with his unit in missions that aimed at hunting down and capturing high-value targets and terrorist cell leaders, hence the need for interpreters was indispensable:

Not being able to interact was a pretty helpless feeling. We would go out to do a mission which usually required communicating with locals. Hence, it was very frustrating when we did not have interpreters who speak the language. To be in all this power and have the desire to do a certain mission in any given day, but not to be able to interact with local population; then you are usually just spinning your wheels.26

As Lieutenant Jason informed me, his unit in Baghdad also faced similarly daunting challenges when operating without interpreters: “As an Army you cannot function in a city without having the ability to speak the language with local people. I have no idea who thought it was a good idea to go to a place like Baghdad with few Americans actually speaking Arabic.”27

Having no interpreters, Jason and his fellow soldiers resorted to sign language to get by until they hired local interpreters. In this context, James Fallows, a national correspondent for the Atlantic, reported:

The junior-level soldiers and Marines I interviewed consistently emphasized how debilitating the language barrier was. Having too few interpreters, they were left to communicate their instructions with gestures and sign language. The result was that
American troops were blind and deaf to much of what was going on around them, and the Iraqis were terrified.28

One night, among other situations, Jason’s unit got a call from the soldiers at the gate of their base in Baghdad. They had a taxi driver with two Iraqis in the back seat who were bleeding to death. The US soldiers could not tell what was going on or what they were required to do. There was a complete failure of communication. In fact, all that they had to know was the Arabic word “mustashfa,” meaning a hospital, which the taxi driver was trying to ask for. Jason noted, “It was so stressful having two guys bleeding to death and someone yelling and trying to explain what was going on in a language you don’t understand.”29

According to the Iraqi interpreters that I interviewed, the shortage of interpreters continued from 2004 through 2008, not only causing problems for the US Army but also exhausting the existing interpreters as well. Firas, pointing out that the critical shortage happened in 2006, explained:

It was stressful seeing my fellow interpreters disappearing from work. It seemed like a bad sign that conditions were getting awkward. The shortage had disastrous effects. First, the unit would be obliged to pressure the existing interpreters with lots of overtime work. Second, the unit would do the work desperately without an interpreter, and would definitely create problems instead of solving them.30

These testimonies of my informants affirm official US concerns about the efficiency of the US military operating in Iraq. The US Army experienced critical shortage in interpreters throughout the years that followed the occupation. The problem was so urgent that it was discussed at the highest level of US military and US politicians in Washington. The consequence
of this shortage was that the US troops lost the ability to communicate with locals and were unable to function efficiently in a culturally complex society.

*Linguistic Bridge, Native Informants, and Cultural Mediators*

Local interpreters, to use the best metaphor, were our “eyes and ears.” They did a lot of jobs more than translation, as far as they informed our understanding of the country we were in. We [US soldiers] were over there in these super bases, whether it was Falcon or the Green Zone, and we would patrol the streets and come back to the bases. And when we were patrolling we had all the weapons and trucks. It was just not a normal kind of interaction with locals. It was amazing that after patrolling, when we returned to our bases, there was a sort of special conversation we had with Iraqi interpreters where they answered all the questions about the culture. They really bridged those two worlds and put a human face for us on Iraq and Iraqi culture.31

Local Iraqi interpreters are the “unknown soldiers” of the US occupation of Iraq. Although they were officially only interpreters who were supposed to interpret language, Iraqi interpreters offered a wide range of invaluable services for the US Army. As they worked with combat military occupation forces, many of whom were unaware of basic information about Iraq, local Iraqi interpreters served as native informants, cultural negotiators, and policy advisors. In addition, the context of the US military occupation and the emergence of Iraqi insurgency and guerrilla warfare shaped a particular type of an intelligence service role for local interpreters. I will discuss these roles under two broad scopes: linguistic and cultural role.

Linguistically, local interpreters enabled the US troops to communicate with Iraqis and provided numerous translation and interpretation services. After being located at a specific base
and being distributed to a military unit, Wadi, Noor, and their fellow interpreters typically went along with patrolling missions for several hours almost on a daily basis. They interpreted in basic communications between US troops and Iraqis whether at check points, streets, schools, and gas stations. When the US troops needed to buy supplies ranging food to furniture, from local markets, local interpreters facilitated these business deals. They also interpreted in formal and informal meetings. According to Dr. Marco:

They were used to allow our forces at lower levels, from Battalion commander and down, to be able to communicate with local people. The idea that the key was they interpreted the language correctly both ways. I am sure misunderstandings happened down at the lower levels due to lack of interpreters, but never happened to me because I had my own interpreters with me. However, I realized how important interpreters were when I later on became General David Paterus’s executive officer and I went on some circulations around Baghdad with him. He had his own interpreters but I did not and it was the first time when I moved around Baghdad without interpreters. It felt really strange for me when I could not communicate with anyone.32

The interpreters were crucial in off-base missions since American troops had much more communication with local Iraqis off-base than on-base. The fact that US troops went along in patrolling, checkpoint missions, and searching homes made local interpreters essential in the process of collecting information and intelligence. In many situations, local Iraqis were inclined to pass on intelligence to the US Army while they were stopped in checkpoints and during search operation. In this context, Kamal explains, “Iraqis were very intimidated to inform about terrorists by going to US bases or by calling Iraqi police. If the unit does not have an interpreter
during a mission, it would lose the ability to communicate with locals and would lose the opportunities to process the intelligence information.”

In addition to interpreting during patrolling missions, each interpreter was assigned to provide on-base interpretation and translation services. Kamal served as a liaison between US military trainers and Iraqi Correction Officers. He interpreted the practical training lessons from English into Arabic and translated the theoretical part of the training by translating the course’s required test — questions and answers — from English into Arabic and conversely. Abdul, after serving for two years in patrolling missions, was recommended by his boss to serve as a medical interpreter in the military hospital in the base he worked for. Abdul explains:

By accident, I met a military physician, who was a US citizen from Pakistani descent, while distributing medical supplies to an Iraqi hospital. He was surprised to know that I had medical education from my study at medical school. Thus, I was moved to serve at the military hospital. I interpreted between US physicians and the Iraqi military, and sometimes civilians, and patients.

In addition to the regular patrolling missions, Wadi took the responsibility of coordinating some correspondences between the US unit he worked for and Iraqi Department of Defense. With increasing cooperation between the US Army and the Iraqi authorities, Wadi was asked to translate security advertisements issued by the Iraqi authorities from Arabic into English so that the US Army would review and edit them if necessary. In addition, he translated invoices sent by the Iraqi Army to the US Army.

Interpreting and translating for US community development and civil affairs teams was a critical job and a challenging responsibility. Firas proved professionalism and loyalty to his US unit during three years of service that they appointed him to be a liaison between the US
contracting officers and local Iraqi contractors. The position Firas held was sensitive as it involved coordinating and distributing millions of dollars as contracts assigned for re-building and community developments projects. Firas points out:

It was tough to deal with the workload. In addition to translating and interpreting, the burden was to balance between the professionalism and my relationships with Iraqi contractors who were mostly Sheiks and people of power. There was a debate about corruption and blackmail cases when it came to million-dollars contractors in which interpreters had a word on their grant decision. In other words, an interpreter could easily influence the award decision of one winner contractor rather than another for bribery or for a per cent of rate of the value of the contract to be given to the interpreter by the contract winner.37

The US veterans I interviewed emphasized these important linguistic roles. Working closely with local interpreters in Baghdad and Mosul, Captain Baker Harry points out:

At my time being in Iraq, we used interpreters for everything. They went wherever we went whether it was immediate need or regular mission. Maybe the local people were super upset or excited, and then it would appear they were having a funeral or a wedding. If I did not have interpreters I would have no idea what was said or what was happening and we would not be able to do anything about it. From small things the interpreter could tell us what was being said, what was happening in the neighborhood, and that would give us an indication of how the neighborhood felt about Americans and the US Army. The interpreters did questionnaire for the targets that we captured and I used my interpreters in interrogation of targets.38
Lieutenant Jason further elaborated on the role of local interpreters who were members of his unit:

The interpreters did everything we could not do. They rolled out in patrolling with us and did basic communication between Iraqis and US soldiers. By time, they were essentially members of the unit, so they could participate in everything like mission planning, mission execution, interrogation, and everything. By the time I left, my interpreters wore body armor and carried pistols. After I left, I was told there were situations when interpreters fought with Americans against the insurgents. It was an ambush and two interpreters were in the vehicle and they used their weapons and fought.39

In the context of the linguistic role, local interpreters had an intrinsic advantage over American interpreters since they knew the Iraqi dialect. Serving as a linguist in Iraq herself, Katie is an insider who could assess fairly the significance of the linguistic role of local interpreters. She points out that the strength point of local interpreters was their ability to speak the local dialect. As she spoke the standard Arabic with local Iraqis, Katie noted that people looked at her as if she were “retarded.”40 Hence, she started to learn the Iraqi dialect over time and used it instead of the standard Arabic. Moreover, as Katie explained further:

I learned very quickly that even Arab-American interpreters lack knowing the Iraqi dialect and that could be a big hindrance. One thing that sticks to my mind was that once I had trouble with a phrase that I kept trying to say it in different ways on Iraqis and they did not understand me. Hence, I went to three guys: a Lebanese, an Egyptian, and I cannot remember where the third were from. I asked them how you would say that Arabic phrase correctly. Each one of them gave me a different answer about the way you have to say it, and they started arguing with each other on how to say it.41
Most of the Iraqi interpreters I interviewed agreed that their speaking the Iraqi dialect distinguished and “privileged” them over other non-Iraqi interpreters —US-citizen interpreters and third nationality interpreters. On the one hand, although standard Arabic is taught in the Iraqi schools, the overwhelming majority of Iraqis speak one of the local Iraqi vernaculars: Baghdadi or Moslawi dialect. In this context, Collin points out, “a relatively small number of Iraqis, mostly men, will read, write, speak, and understand Modern Standard Arabic with a high level of competence and sophistication.” On the other hand, Iraqi dialect is not wide-spread in the Arab countries due to Iraq’s isolation before the war in 2003. In addition, the Iraqi dialect was affected by the diversity of languages spoken in neighboring countries. Sandra Mackey suggests, “Iraq is pluralistic and idiosyncratic that even spoken Arabic, incorporating a multitude of loan words from Persian, Turkish, and Kurdish, far exceeds the linguistic variants found in other Arab states.” The result was that communication between American and Arab-American interpreters, who spoke standard Arabic or non-Iraqi dialects, and Iraqis was inaccessible. In this respect, Kamal argued that during his work he found that Arab-American and American interpreters were effective in translating written language but not in verbal interpretation. He explains:

They should have provided Arab-American interpreters with classes teaching them the Iraqi dialect before recruiting them. If the interpreter was Somali, Egyptian, or Sudanese he would not, in most cases, succeed to communicate with locals, especially in rural areas where Iraqis have poor education. It did not make sense to hire people as in Iraq simply because they are of Arab descent. It is like asking an Indian to communicate with a Chinese simply because they are both Asians.
Thus, non-Iraqi interpreters usually needed the assistance of local interpreters to understand the local dialect. During his work with a military unit that was responsible for a detention facility, Hadi revealed that he was required to attend during formal and important meetings with local security leaders, although he did not interpret during the proceedings. He explained, “When important meetings that involve sensitive security information were held with Iraqi leaders, a senior US-citizen interpreter usually took the responsibility of interpretation. However, I was asked to stay close to that interpreter in case he needed help with certain Iraqi street speech, vocabulary, or proverb.” Hadi also noted that during his conversations with them, he taught non-Iraqi interpreters numerous Iraqi words and phrases. It became more problematic when non-Iraqi interpreters were in situations that required instant interaction and reaction with locals. In this respect, Noor recalls a situation in which miscommunication lead to confusion:

The unit I worked for raided a neighborhood at one night. Each group of troops had an interpreter and they rushed at homes quickly and simultaneously, but one group of soldiers overstayed in a home. After I was called there, I found out that the interpreter was an Arab who spoke very poor Iraqi and that he was struggling with the dialect. People there were terrified so that I think that when Americans break into people’s homes at night while people are sleeping, they need to have an interpreter who can facilitate the interaction not complicate it.

These anecdotes and experiences of my informants thus reveal the way in which local interpreters served as a crucial linguistic bridge between US troops and Iraqis. They enabled US troops at lower levels to communicate with people whether in basic conversations, formal meetings, or collecting information and intelligence. They also served as liaisons in military hospitals, detention facilities, and Iraqi Army training camps. In addition, they participated in
community development projects by translating documents, solicitations, and correspondences between US civil affairs teams and local contractors. At higher levels of US military, they assisted US-citizen interpreters in understanding the local dialect. Hence, the dialect issue marked one of the major differences between local interpreters and non-Iraqi interpreters and made local interpreters indispensable to the effectiveness of US Army operations in Iraq.

In addition to the linguistic role, I was surprised to learn of the extensive and critical cultural services local interpreters provided for the US troops. The cultural role of Iraqi interpreters was due to the huge gap between American and Iraqi culture and due to the poor cultural preparation of US troops before deployment to Iraq. These roles included: interpreters serving as native informants of numerous aspects of Iraqi life, and guiding US troops through the complexities of Iraqi society and its traditions.

Iraqi interpreters are very reliable local informants. The fact that they were insiders, who experienced and comprehended Iraqi life through conditions of peace and war, and that they had good education qualified them to be credible source of local information. During my interviews with US veterans of Iraq, they admitted that they were uninformed about Iraq not only in terms of language but also in terms of its history, culture, religion, and politics. Although she dated an Arab man in America for a couple of years and was familiar with many concepts of the Arab culture and Islam, Katie lacked important information about Iraq. She explains:

I lacked important information about Iraq. I wish I had been more familiar with what really Iraqi life was like under the totalitarian regime of Saddam and how that badly impacted so many aspects of the culture. I think I would be better prepared to anticipate how people would respond and how I could better interact with them if I had a deeper understanding of that situation. I also wish that I had understood more about what tribes
were important in Iraq and what tribal relationship meant in Iraq. I also wish I had known more about the ethnic and religious diversity in Iraq beyond Sunni, Shia, and Kurds because I did not know other smaller minorities in Iraq. 47

In addition, Katie and her fellow soldiers did not understand some of the visual cues. The fact that different types of head coverings have different meanings—like a turban vs. other types of head coverings indicating sectarian and regional identity—was unfamiliar to Katie and other US soldiers. 48 Other veterans of Iraq blamed their poor training in the US for the negative and inaccurate images of Arabs and Muslims that they had internalized. Jason points out, “I think it was most beneficial to know that Iraqis are just like Americans. The things they told us before deployment to Iraq about Iraqis and Muslim culture was like they were from another planet.” 49

This cultural gap and lack of information about Iraq had to be bridged by local interpreters. In this context, Katie emphasized that the American troops felt lost in numerous situations not only for not having the language capabilities—Katie herself spoke Arabic and served as a linguist—but also for not having knowledge of the dynamics of local Iraqi life. She explained:

 Everybody saw the media reporting of the looting in Baghdad directly after the invasion. We were there, but we could not stop it. It is true that there were not enough US soldiers and the Iraqi Army had fallen apart, but on the other hand when my unit was going out to stop people we thought were looters, it was impossible because we could not tell who were looters and who were people who were just trying to flee. All people were afraid, so if you saw people taking possessions from houses, how could you know if they were looting the house or were people who lived there and they were just trying to flee with
their families because they were scared. That was one situation where a local interpreter would make a huge difference.\textsuperscript{50}

This advantage of local interpreters as insiders is emphasized not only by US veterans but also by journalists and Iraqi interpreters themselves. For instance, Nir Rosen, a US journalist who spent three years in Iraq, reported what happened due to the US troops’ ignorance of Iraqi life and the absence of a local interpreter. He explained that during a US night raid aiming at the capturing an Iraqi suspect,

\ldots Soldiers emerged with bags full of documents, photo albums and two CDs with Saddam and his cronies on the cover. These CDs called “The Crimes of Saddam” are common on every Iraqi street, and as their title suggests, they were not made by Saddam supporters; however, the soldiers saw only the picture of Saddam and assumed they were proof of guilt.\textsuperscript{51}

In another situation, Rosen also reported how US soldiers misunderstood the significance of the wooden crates they found in almost every Iraqi home. These crates were formerly used for ammunition storage during the last three decades in Iraq domestic and regional wars. When these crates were empty, they were sold in Iraqi markets and used for storage. They were widely used in Iraqis’ backyards to cover and protect a small water pump that was usually used for irrigating backyards.

The soldiers with the Army unit I was with assumed the crates they found in nearly every home implicated the owners in terrorist activities \ldots During the operation described here I saw one of the soldiers find such a crate overturned above a small hole in a man’s backyard. “He was trying to bury it when he saw us coming,” one soldier deduced confidently.\textsuperscript{52}
These cultural misunderstandings were apparent to local interpreters. Therefore, they employed this advantage of being locals whether on-base work or during off-base missions. Most interpreters were asked to prepare and deliver “cultural awareness lessons” to educate US troops about Iraqi life. Doing this for his unit, Noor points out:

They needed to know the simplest thing about Iraq. US soldiers came over from their states unaware that they had to behave differently from their own culture. I explained to them basic things they must not do in Iraq and other things they had to do in order to survive. Things range from dealing with Iraqi women to searching homes and mosques to informing them about Iraqi life in general.53

In addition to providing cultural lessons, Abdul noted that he explained to US troops the mindset and nature of Iraqis. He explained,

The disadvantage with Americans was that they believed everything. When local Iraqis came over to the base for different reasons, the cultural misunderstanding was a big issue. We had locals who came to report insurgents or claim compensation. Americans took them very seriously as they would have done in America. I advised them that Iraqis in nature exaggerate everything. If a local noticed one insurgent, he would claim he saw 20, and if he got his car scratched by a US vehicle, he would claim it was completely damaged. Without my recommendations, Americans would have been ripped off easily.54

The insider knowledge of interpreters also enabled them to avert potentially damaging cultural conflicts. Working closely with Iraqi Correction Officers in a detention facility, Hadi served as a cultural mediator between Iraqi officers and US troops at the base. On one hand, he advised Iraqi officers to be serious during work and avoid provoking Americans by asking personal and unrelated questions during training. On the other hand, he helped Americans deal
with Iraqis properly. He points out, “Americans are professional at work while Iraqi are more inclined to be social and put high value in developing personal relationships with US trainers. I tried to balance between both.” On one occasion, Hadi intervened to avoid such a conflict. He explained:

The lecture was about how to treat highly valued Iraqi targets. The US general needed a good example of highly valued detainee so he referred to Moktada al-sadr, the Iraqi Shia clergyman, as an example of a man who would soon be detained by American and Iraqi forces. I immediately noticed that the audience made up of Iraqi officers was all Shia who follow Moktada al-sadr or at least highly sympathize with him. Hence, I stopped interpreting and I explained everything to the US general asking him to find another example, most preferably a Sunni figure. I mean that might seem trivial issues for people who are unaware of the situation in Iraq, but believe it or not such issues are more important than military operations.

In addition, Hadi explained that he had to be honest to succeed in his work. In this context, he notified Americans if he thought an officer was misbehaving. In one situation, for example, he informed Americans that an officer was lying when one day that officer asked for a day off for to go to a funeral and two weeks after that he asked for another day off to go to a wedding. He explained to Americans that this sequence of events in the family, of having a wedding directly after a funeral, did not happen in the Iraqi culture.

Most importantly, local interpreters assisted in explaining to US troops the nature of Iraqi life. As Iraqis knew very well the kind of life Iraqis lived, the way they made living, the things that troubled them, and their daily social activity. Hence, when dealing with Iraqi whether on-bases or off-base, this advantage enabled Kamal to solve numerous troubles for his US unit.
simply by answering whatever questions they had about Iraqis and recommending suitable solutions for these troubles. Kamal notes,

It did not take more than few moments to guess the life story of an old Iraqi man who came over to the base to complain about US soldiers who by mistake hit his home gate. I did not do long day paperwork with him. Instead, I apologized, kissed him on the head, and sent him home with some cash to fix up the gate. Then, the US unit and I could get down to more important work.\textsuperscript{57}

During off-base missions, the cultural role of local interpreters was critical. Hence, it is no exaggeration to claim that local interpreters saved American as well as Iraqi lives. Knowing the tribal nature of the town he operated in, Noor volunteered to invite the local Sheiks for a dialogue with Americans on a dispute between the two parties. He points out:

I coordinated with a network of acquaintances who introduced me to these Sheiks and guarantied my safety. I introduced myself as a third party who wanted to serve as a mediator. I knew that the Sheiks could not hurt me due to tribal consideration and it was still 2003. I brought the Sheiks to the base and fixed up a problem that could have developed badly. Both parties were grateful for my help.\textsuperscript{58}

Firas and his fellow interpreters took seriously the responsibility of preventing problems during searching operations. They made every effort to soften people’s outrage and negative feelings towards Americans. It was especially sensitive when a dozen of heavily armed soldiers broke into an Iraqi house and searched for weapons in bedrooms. Therefore, Iraqi interpreters employed a method of conduct to facilitate the search mission. Firas tended to get in front of the soldiers to talk with people. He guided soldiers through the rooms or divisions of the homes as
they were unfamiliar with Iraqi homes’ structure. In addition, Firas warned Americans not to touch Iraqi women or smile at them and never to drop the Koran on the floor while searching.\textsuperscript{59}

The fact that US troops were ignorant of Iraqi life brought about problems. In this context, the tribal nature of Iraqi society with its commitment to tribal values and women’s status within this system, was a sensitive issue and created delicate situations. For instance, on a regular checkpoint mission in a tribal town, Abdul urged American troops not to violate tribal values:

We stopped a man with his wife and daughters in his car. The man wore aagal, an Arabic traditional headdress that is a mark of tribal manhood. The US troops asked him to order the women out of the car for the search. He angrily refused so US troops dragged him out of the car and dropped his aagal on the ground. I intervened and explained to soldiers that they had to stop this because it was a big insult for that man to drop his aagal or to search his women. I told them such behaviors feed insurgency. I intervened myself and fixed up the situation.\textsuperscript{60}

All other interpreters performed similar kinds of intervention during missions. Operating during raids and search missions in “hot” areas, Hadi emphasized this cultural role:

As an interpreter, I can either facilitate the US Army mission or complicate it. When searching Iraqi homes, the way you knock at the door is extremely vital in the people’s response to your knock and to your request to enter the house. One way of knocking at the door makes the home’s tenants welcome you by offering water and tea, while another way of knocking makes them respond to you by shooting RPG missiles at you from the home roof. I mean a simple gesture or a word from you as an interpreter is crucial to the way local Iraqi responded to the US Army.\textsuperscript{61}
In addition, during missions local interpreters actively helped in explaining where terrorists were probably hiding, what a neighborhood was like and which houses appeared suspicious. According to the interpreters, they could also tell by looking at an Iraqi suspect whether he might be guilty or innocent. In this context, Kamal recounted:

Many times, for instance, when we were patrolling with the US forces we suspected people who were attempting to plant a roadside bomb. Once we interrogated the suspect, I could tell if the man was innocent or guilty. As an interpreter, I can not believe such an Iraqi if he tells me that he is just looking for his keys that he lost in the morning or if he tells me he saw loose wires at the roadside and he is trying to take them and sell them. In such cases, I interpret everything but then I would hint to Americans that the guy is probably not telling the truth or that his excuse for hanging out at the roadside at night does not make sense to Iraqis. It was basically if the suspect could fool the interpreter in such situations then he fooled the US forces.\(^62\)

The local interpreters’ ability to blend into Iraqi society and then to come back to US bases was exceptionally valuable. During his work for a US Civil Affairs team, Firas assisted firstly in creating community development projects by visiting neighborhoods and specifying their basic needs. Secondly, he served as a “reporter” of local Iraqi markets status. Hence, he ensured that business deals with local contractors were fair. He points out,

I saved my unit hundreds of thousands of dollars. In Iraqi business, it is typical that traders overprice their products to allow a margin for negotiation while Americans and their trade culture are more inclined for fixed prices. In addition, Americans did not have the mechanism and access to check prices in local markets, so that they could not know whether something was really worth $1 or $1,000. Since I was responsible for proposing
the cost of each contract according to Iraqi markets, I negotiated with local contractors, after collecting information from Iraqi markets, the value of each contract whether a small contract of $500 to supply a desk or a larger contract of $1,000,000 to construct a school.63

This advantage that came from Iraqi interpreters having what might be called “dual-presence” — in the US military and in Iraqi civilian life — was also used for other purposes. No group of Iraqis or non-Iraqis other than local interpreters had the ability to move between different neighborhoods and US bases and of transmitting news and information from both sides. In this context, George Packer, who has written extensively about Iraq for The New Yorker, reported that two interpreters he interviewed acted as a “go-between, carrying information between the U.S. outpost, the local government, the Shia clergy, and the radical Sadrists”64

Packer recounts the role of Ahmed, a Shia interpreter living in the Shia-militia stronghold and turbulent neighborhood of Sadr City, who was responsible for reporting on Shia issues in Sadr City:

His job required him to seek contact with members of Shiite militias . . . He once went to a council meeting near Sadr City that had been called to arrange a truce between the Americans and Mahdi Army so that garbage could be cleared from streets. A council member confronted Ahmed, demanding to know who he was. Ahmed responded, “I’m from a Korean organization” . . . At another meeting, he identified himself as a correspondent from an Iraqi Television network.65

Ahmed and his fellow interpreters, who served with the political section in the US embassy in Baghdad, were also encouraged to write reports on Iraqi politics that were sometimes forwarded to Washington and influenced US political decisions on Iraqi issues.66 Jeffery Beals, a
US employee in the political section of the US embassy in Baghdad, emphasized the importance of interpreters in this respect to Packer, “there aren’t many people with pro-American eyes and the means to get their messages across who can go into Sadr City and tell you what’s happening day to day.”

In addition to Packer’s stories, the US veterans I interviewed emphasized this role of local interpreters. Dr. Marco, for instance, explained:

The other thing we would use some local interpreters for is just to get us a sense of the rumors in town and what was the tea-shop talk. We would send them around to Baghdad tea shops and markets and they would just listen and report. That was very useful. In fact, we would not send Americans and even Iraqi Americans out in such missions because there was a chance they would be kidnapped.

Some interpreters volunteered to report intelligence for their units. When I asked him about using his interpreters as informers, Baker replied, “I cannot comment on what goes on in more secret programs but I would not be surprised if that happened. For what we were doing, we did not use interpreters that way although sometimes when they came back from leave they would say like I was in that neighborhood and I know for fact that they put a bomb on that street corner and that happened few times.”

Finally the “duel-presence” helped Iraqis, although to a limited extent, get a sense of who Americans were. According to Dr. Marco this fostered more mutual understanding:

I think one of the interesting things about interpreters they got pretty good look at Americans. Most Iraqis really had not got a lot of contact with Americans. All what they knew is through watching TV. The interesting thing was that, after having seeing Americans close up and worked with them, what is communicated back to the Iraqi
society about Americans by interpreters. I think, in all of cases, what communicated back to the Iraqi society was that: hey, these guys are not that bad, they are not here to steal our houses or rape women which sort of what people thought of us in 2003. People just learn that Americans are like Iraqis; some of them are good, some of them are bad, some of them are educated, some of them are not, they are just people.}

The position of local interpreters therefore surpassed the expectations of US military personnel. They were the second “elite” group of Iraqi, after Iraqi exiles, with whom US troops could communicate and discuss Iraqi issues. When US troops were stationed in giant military bases throughout Iraq, their knowledge of Iraqis was often limited to what their Iraqi interpreters informed them and some of their decisions were taken in consultation with them. Although local interpreters who worked for the US diplomatic missions played a prominent and leading role, those interpreters who worked with the military also played a crucial role. Having worked in the same region and base for four consecutive years, Kamal and his fellow interpreters became leading members of the US unit. He explains:

We had more experience in the work than a newly deployed unit. We were a group of interpreters who worked at the same camp for four different units, so we accumulated a huge experience in that work. We did not lead the unit in terms of taking decisions to attack targets but the unit would usually listen to us because they knew we had spent longer time than they did in the same job. Hence, we were invited to attend meetings that discussed the progress of training the Iraqi officers and Correction Officers, or discussed expanding the training program. We usually suggested important things that Americans would consider highly, such as we suggested criteria of selecting “special forces” from
the Iraqi officers and suggested a reading and writing test for the Special Forces since we thought such people needed to be literate.71

In other situations, Kamal actually led his unit. In a checkpoint mission, the US unit captured a car with four men and twenty Rocket-Propelled Grenade (RPG) missiles in the trunk. The US troops intended to discover the weapon’s source and capture other insurgents, but they could have messed up the mission. Hence, Kamal asked the commander to allow him to act himself. He points out, “the driver claimed that he was a stranger to the neighborhood and that he was taxi driver and did not know about the weapon in his car. I immediately checked the four men’s IDs and found that he was honest. I separated him from the other three men so that he would not be intimidated.”72 Drawing on his local knowledge, Kamal explained to the US soldiers that from their IDs he knew that the three men were from the same tribe whereas the driver was from a different tribe and therefore was probably innocent. Further, he urged his commander not to send the driver to interrogation but to use him as a guide to the weapon’s source instead. Kamal points out:

I believed that in such situations we needed to react quickly and put the American bureaucracy aside. I wore civilian clothes and put a hand gun in my belt and asked the driver to walk a meter in front of me and to look carefully for the house from which they loaded the weapons. After we specified the house, we returned to the base and raided the house, captured the terrorists, and seized another 75 RPG missiles.73

Kamal emphasized that if he had not intervened, his US commander was going to send the four men for interrogation that would take weeks, and the driver would probably be intimidated not to tell the truth. Even if he did, by that time the terrorists and the weapons in the house would have disappeared.74
Interestingly, local interpreters also served as an eye for US senior commanders on the unit’s soldiers. For instance, Abdul was asked by his commander to watch for soldiers’ misbehavior with Iraqis whether on-base or off-base. He was also permitted to use a camera during missions to videotape any misbehavior and report it. Operating in a farming town, Abdul searched a corn farm with US troops after a mortar attack on their base. Finding no insurgents but heaps of reaped corn, a US solider set fire to one heap by using his lighter. Abdul said, “I immediately reported the incident to my commander who called for that soldier and had a talk with him. The unit opened an investigation on the incident and subsequently compensated the farm’s owner.”

Similarly, other interpreters also put in a word to replace a solider or relocate another. Hadi points out, “The high US generals are very professional, so if interpreters complain about a US soldier they would listen to us and react. I once reported a soldier who misbehaved with civilian Iraqis at the base gate, and he was replaced the immediate next day.”

In a similar way, local interpreters exposed aalassa, infiltrators, who pretended to work as interpreters but actually worked as spies for terrorists and militia. For instance, Abdul reported a new interpreter who was found to be a spy for militias. Abdul explained, “he was a very stupid spy. He asked everyone for accurate maps of the base and tried to eavesdrop on US commanders. We reported him within a week.” In another story, Hadi points out, “As interpreters, we were very good in catching and reporting infiltrators to Americans because they could harm us as much as they harmed Americans. One day a female interpreter in my unit was captured for collecting other interpreters’ names and addresses.”

Iraqi interpreters therefore took on varied roles and served as invaluable liaisons between the US military and Iraqi civilians. In short, during the US occupation, local interpreters provided the US Army with numerous services that non-Iraqi interpreters could not provide.
These services included: providing different linguistic interpretation and translation tasks whether on-base or off-base; serving as native informants to educate US troops about Iraq, serving as cultural guides who assisted US troops in navigating through the complexities of the tribal nature of Iraqi society; engaging in intelligence work; and becoming effective and critical members of their military units. Hence, they were the “unknown soldiers” of the Iraq war. These roles, however, as my next chapter describes, came with great risks and interpreters and their families led an unusual and precarious life. These risks eventually changed interpreters’ lives forcing many to escape from Iraq seeking to build new lives in the US.
CHAPTER III
FROM THE BATTLEFIELD TO AMERICA: IRAQI INTERPRETERS’ IMMIGRATION TO THE US

Risks and Strategies of Survival

My interpreters had nicknames, and they wore masks to hide their identities. They faced the same risks as we faced whether in patrols or in base. Then they went out of the city by themselves for the break. At least we knew that we were going to go home after we would finish our tour, whereas they had no set time frame to work for us. We would fly to Seattle and have a big dinner, but they just rolled over to a new unit after a new unit and kept working. In many ways, I think our service and our courage pale a little bit in comparison to what they endured because they served and went out and they took more risks than we did with their lives, and what they got for it was not close to what we had to look forward to.¹

The immigration of thousands of local Iraqi interpreters to the US came after the loss of hundreds of interpreters’ lives and after the emergence of a moral crisis in the United States about protecting local Iraqis who assisted America. This chapter examines the risks interpreters experienced and their subsequent strategies for survival. I discuss their immigration experience and following their path to the US and explore their adjustment experience in their new country of residence.

In the first months after the occupation of Iraq, Iraqi interpreters were mostly proud of working with US troops. It seemed a privilege to be in a position where friends, relatives, and local people needed them to interact with Americans. It was also a part of a dream to build a new Iraq by helping America in Iraq. Hence, interpreters were comfortable to reveal the nature of
their work and were pleased even to get a ride on a US military vehicle to and from work without having to think of any risks involved.

With the emergence of the insurgency and violence a few months after the invasion, members of the Baath party of Saddam Hussein, the Islamists, and other insurgent groups launched a campaign against Iraqi interpreters whom they considered to be traitors, collaborators, and spies. The campaign started first as rumors and the circulation of false stories in order to portray interpreters as traitor Iraqis. By the beginning of 2004, for example, the Baathists and extremist groups started to spread rumors that interpreters advised Americans to use dirty means to capture wanted suspects, such means as capturing the suspect’s sisters and daughters to pressure the suspect to surrender to Americans. They used the Arabic word “aameel,” meaning collaborator and agent, to identify Iraqi interpreters. Therefore, the atmosphere of suspicion against interpreters spread. George Packer reported an interview with Ali, an Iraqi interpreter, in which he pointed out, “before long, Ali told me, the Baathists made the reputation of the interpreters very, very low—worse than the Americans.”

According to US press and UN reports, U.S.-affiliated Iraqis, especially interpreters, began to be harassed and targeted by the beginning of 2004 with the spread of insurgency. This coincided with an increase in tension between the US Army and the Sunni and some Shia communities after the circulation of the Abu Ghraib abuse photos. However, the anti-US sentiment and the hostility against interpreters were galvanized when the US Army and Iraqi Army tried to crush insurgents in the turbulent western city of Falluja in April 2004 after insurgents murdered and mutilated the bodies of four American contractors. Meanwhile, the US Army was trying to crush the Shia insurgent group of Moqtada Al Sadr in the eastern city of Sadr city in Baghdad and in the Southern city of Najaf. These events had negative effects on
interpreters since that they were used to interpret conversations and negotiate with locals during these battles.

The hostility against interpreters was accompanied by a systematic assassination campaign. First Sgt. Stephen Valley, a U.S. Army reservist who worked with Arab journalists in Baghdad, points out, “there was a period when it seemed translators were being targeted on a daily basis . . . There was virtually no way to protect these people.” The extremists started to actually kidnap interpreters and behead them. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports:

Attacks on Iraqi translators, drivers, contractors and others who work with foreign governments often are aimed at punishing them for their collaboration and warning others to avoid such work. Some insurgent groups have broadcast videos of executions, sometimes by beheading, on the internet or on CDs that are sold in markets, preceded by a “confession” and statement from the person in custody.

In this context, in May 2005, Associated Press writer, Jim Krane, reported a series of murders incidents: Luqman Mohammed, a 41 year-old interpreter, was captured by insurgents and his beheading was posted on the internet. Another interpreter appeared as a hostage on Al-Arabiya television, and five Iraqi women were killed by insurgents when traveling home from their jobs on a US base. Further, Krane interviewed Maj. Derik Von Recum, a US military personnel, who operated in a hostile neighborhood west of Baghdad, who points out, “the Army has conducted memorial ceremonies for slain Titan interpreters . . . The first, an Iraqi woman, was killed in July . . . the second, an Iraqi man, stopped coming to work in November. It took a few days to figure out insurgents had kidnapped and killed him.” Other interpreters received
murder threats such as with Anees who worked as an interpreter for two years and received a letter, with a bullet in it, accusing him of being a traitor.⁹

According to interpreters, press reports, and news reports, local interpreters were murdered in numerous ways and the risks they experienced far exceeded what had been anticipated. In addition to risks involved in mortar attacks on US bases, local interpreters jeopardized their lives when patrolling. In fact, Noor, the interpreter I interviewed, lost one of his legs during one of these patrolling missions, and many others lost limbs or became disabled in such attacks. In addition, interpreters were generally not allowed to carry weapons and were not provided with the same quality of body armor US soldiers wore and sometimes operated without body armors and hamlets at all which compounded the casualties among them due to roadside bombs attacks.¹⁰

Further, interpreters were soft targets for snipers. During on-foot missions with US forces, interpreters experienced fatal attacks. Joel Millman and Gina Chon interviewed Adil, an Iraqi interpreter, who described the fear that haunted him of sniper attacks. Adil states, “It’s something you never forget, not for the rest of your life . . . nothing terrified him as much as hearing a patrol leader bark the order, “take cover, sniper!” and hitting the ground.”¹¹ Going out on such missions, Kamal explains that he sensed the meaning of death in these missions. He points out,

I would rather do 50 patrolling missions than one on-foot. We usually walked for several miles in uncovered areas among buildings on both sides and we were horrified if we saw someone on a roof. Because interpreters walked differently, had different body structures, and carried no weapons, snipers recognized us and were tempted to kill us first. We were also not provided sometimes with adequate body protection supplies.¹²
However, the nightmare that haunted local interpreters was finding a safe way to go home for a short break and then to come back to the US bases for work again. The experience involved considerable jeopardy. On one hand, insurgents planted their spies around US bases waiting to hunt down collaborators. When interpreters left the military bases, insurgents followed them and assassinated them. On the other hand, the bases were usually located out of towns in isolated locations which made it impossible for interpreters to catch public transportation and to blend quickly with other locals.13 All the interpreters and the US veterans I interviewed emphasized the deadly nature of taking a break and going home. Hadi reveals:

Going home was a horrible experience. I saw my family twice in two years of work. When I went home in these two times, I escaped numerous challenges and I was very close to death. Hence, I stopped taking breaks. We used to say a passionate goodbye for a fellow interpreter who wanted to go home because we might not see him again. In fact, many friends of mine were killed during these visits. We would patrol and would find them beheaded and dumped at the roadside.14

The transportation issue became a prominent crisis in relation to the interpreters’ work. Having lost many fellow interpreters in a similar scenario, Abdul and his fellow interpreters threatened to quit their work if Americans did not provide them with safe air transportation. Abdul points out, “none of us was willing to commit suicide by going home in cars. We complained to Americans, and we were about to do a massive strike. The base’s leaders eventually assigned helicopters to transport us to specific bases in Baghdad.”15 The air transportation was limited to US bases in the two Iraqi governorates of Mosal, 250 miles northwest of Baghdad, and Al- Anbar, about 270 miles west of Baghdad. The air transportation, however, did not change the fact that local interpreters were still required to go home from US
bases; this time from bases in Baghdad. It only reduced risks but never eliminated them.

Understanding these challenges, Captain Baker noted that his unit did everything to protect its interpreters. He explains, “There was no one great solution to get them back home. Sometimes in Mosal we tried to drop them off in places that were not visible to passing traffic and it would not be clear that they got off American vehicles. We were trying to make sure that insurgents could not track them.”

The worst happened when interpreters’ lives became a commodity that offered smaller insurgent groups thousands of dollars. When Al-Qaeda specified local interpreters as their target number one, they hired smaller cells to hunt interpreters for money. Hadi explained that one of his fellow interpreters was discovered to leak other interpreters’ names and addresses to insurgents for money. In this context, Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, the Guardian reporter in Basra, reported:

The assassins chat, eat kebabs and stroll around in small groups, discussing their sinister trade. They buy and sell names of collaborators, Iraqis who worked for the British . . . depending on the nature of their perceived crimes; the price of the collaborator’s head can vary from a couple of hundred dollars to a few thousand. The most valuable lives these days in Basra are those of the interpreters.”

In reaction to these risks, interpreters followed numerous and creative strategies on-base and off-base in order to survive. Tim Hsia, a US Army Captain, shares the experience he had while working an Iraqi interpreter in Mosul, “interpreters lead dangerous double lives, one moment wearing an Army combat uniform and the other minute dressing in local grab to blend back in with the rest of the populace” In both cases, the key and common strategy to survive was to hide one’s identity and to keep secret the nature of the job. Interpreters created a specific
system inside the US military bases to hide their identities and to survive. They used nicknames among themselves and with US troops, wore US military uniforms, put on sunglasses, and some of them wore masks to hide their faces.²⁰ As Hadi explains:

When you decide to work as an interpreter for the US Army, you have to put in your mind that you decided to enter a different world. If you slip your tongue or slack in your carefulness, it can lead to your death. In addition to using a nickname, you have to protect your other identity features. Never expose your address, your phone number, your ethnic identity, your tribe, your education, or any other personal information to any Iraqi at work whether Army and police personnel or general laborers.²¹

The mistrust among interpreters and the fear of the aalasa, infiltrators, heightened the sense risk on-base. Hence, hiding one’s identity extended to hiding it among the smaller circle of interpreters. Wadi points out, “I liked my fellow interpreters very much but we never asked each other “red-tape questions” like who you are and where you are from and that was for good reasons.”²² In addition to that, when interpreters were to leave for a break, they would never spread the word in order to prevent leaks and reports to insurgents. Abdul emphasized that his fellow interpreters and he understood these privacy tactics, and they followed such strategies to protect each other. He explains:

We knew very well it was a life and death matter. So that we were not upset with each other about hiding our real identities. The other reason was that in case one of us was kidnapped by insurgents, he would not know the names and addresses of the rest of us. Such cases really happened and that was how we developed all these strategies.²³

In addition, interpreters coded people’s names on their cell phones in case they were kidnapped. Hadi explained that he gave false names to his family members and close friends to
protect them. He pointed out, “I felt I had been sentenced to death and I did not want to involve my family or friends with all this.”

Hadi emphasized interpreters’ mistrust of each other but explained that he had to trust a few of them: “over time in work, I trusted my life with two close interpreters and gave them my family’s contact information in case something happened to me, and they did the same.” Finally, during missions and when interpreting with locals, interpreters tended to fake Arabic accents and claimed to be strangers in Iraq.

In addition to these risks on-base, interpreters lead unusual lives living in fear and hiding from their communities when they were off-base. Interpreters did not reveal their real jobs with the US Army to their neighbors, relatives, and sometimes even to their families. Instead, they invented a “cover story” to justify their absence from home for long months. Firas points out, I kept it secret even from my parents and brothers. You never know who might slip his tongue and expose my work. Sometimes I claimed that I had found a job in an oil company in the north of Iraq, and other times I claimed I had to travel to Syria for medical examinations and so forth. It wasn’t until I got my SIV visa that I told my brothers about my work with the US Army.

Despite inventing a cover story, the absence from home was still risky. The interpreters I interviewed as well as interpreters interviewed by the US press pointed out that there were situations when insurgents in certain neighborhoods came over to their homes and interrogated their families about the reasons for their absence to make sure that they had not worked for Americans. Adil, interviewed by Joel Millman and Gina Chon, explains, “When someone is gone for a while, and nobody knows if he’s really dead, the militias start asking, ‘is he with the Americans?’” Working closely with his interpreters, Captain Baker explained, “I can only imagine being so constantly subjected to this kind of stress that you know any moment the
insurgents just come down to your home and found out you were not there, you risked your life."²⁸

Iraqi interpreters had to change their social life and social relationships in order to survive. When they had a break from work, they usually stayed home. Basically going out for a walk or hanging out in public places was potentially dangerous because there was a chance that by accident the interpreter might run into somebody who can recognize him/her as an interpreter. In this context, Kamal explains,

"I lived in hiding for six years. I was afraid to be recognized if I went out in public. It could be somebody we captured, interrogated, questioned, met during patrolling, met during training, and so forth. Hence, I lost most of my friends and almost had no social life throughout the years I worked with the US Army. If it was necessary to go out, I would take somebody with me and would hold a pistol too.²⁹"

The experience of living off-base during the break involved extremely complicated procedures. Whether driving their own cars or taking public transportation in case they needed to go out, interpreters changed their routes to reduce the chance of being followed by insurgents. They also developed skills of discernment to feel dangers. George Packer interviewed Hussein, an Iraqi interpreter, he reported:

"He worked out of a series of rented rooms, seldom going out in public . . . keeping a small “runaway bag” with him in case he needed to leave quickly . . . “you have to always be aware of the car behind you. When you want to park, you make sure that the car passes you. You’re always afraid of a person staring at you in an abnormal way.”³⁰"

After a break was ended, interpreters had to survive another difficult experience in order to return to US bases for work. Depending on how far the US base was, interpreters arranged for
a family member to give them a ride from their homes to another neighborhood and from there take multiple buses and taxi rides.\textsuperscript{31} In addition, interpreters maneuvered to disguise their work by wearing specific clothes. Firas explained that he used to wear a white physician’s uniform so that people would not suspect his work as an interpreter. He explains, “If insurgents kidnapped me while on my way to a US base, I would have the opportunity to claim that I worked as a physician to treat Iraqi detainees. In such desperate cases, any claim would be less dire than being an interpreter.”\textsuperscript{32} Other interpreters found no option but to wear the \textit{abbaa}, a traditional black women’s cloak, to sneak safely out of their dangerous neighborhoods and escape from insurgents.\textsuperscript{33}

Interpreters incurred great losses in lives despite all the strategies they followed to protect themselves. As a matter of fact, there was no way that all interpreters would survive all these risks everyday and for many years. Wadi explains, “I never knew when the day would come when I would take the wrong taxi cab, the wrong road, or go along with the unlucky US patrol.”\textsuperscript{34} Wadi revealed the loss of thirty-five interpreters in two years just at the base where he worked. As to more official statistics of interpreters’ causalities, Badkhen reports in 2008, “since the war began five years ago, at least 200 Iraqi translators have been killed, most of them in targeted killings, according to L3 Communication, a New York Company that supplies interpreters to the US military.”\textsuperscript{35} The Christian Science Monitor reported at the end of 2008 that 300 Iraqi interpreters were slain at the hands of insurgents.\textsuperscript{36} As to interpreters affiliated with the Multi-National forces, Sean Rayment, a correspondent for \textit{The Telegraph}, reports in 2007 that 60 interpreters working for the British forces in the Iraqi south were murdered at the hand of insurgents.\textsuperscript{37} However, these numbers are fewer than the actual number of interpreters’ death, given that most interpreters’ families did not report the death for fear of revenge and for the
social dishonor involved. Furthermore, companies recruiting interpreters are unwilling to expose actual numbers of deaths to their business interests.

After experiencing tremendous risks and having been resented by their native people, interpreters were in some cases betrayed by Americans. They were sometimes treated by Americans with suspicion and distrust despite their sacrifices and risky work. Being local Iraqis, interpreters were perceived as a potential threat and an enemy within. Hence, they were denied special badges that would allow them easy access to the US military bases instead of waiting in long lines, and at the bases’ gates they were searched carefully like other ordinary Iraqis. Moreover, inside the military bases, they were perceived sometimes as spies for the insurgency. They were not allowed, in many cases, to use electronic devices, cell phones, and were even denied access to facilities such as gyms, dining halls, and pools. This poor treatment left a bitter taste for many Iraqi interpreters. In an interview in April 2006, Roger told the Christian Monitor’s correspondent, “If you look at our situation it’s really risky and kind of horrible. Outside the wire everybody looks at us like we are back-stabbers, like we betrayed our country and our religion, and then inside the wire they look at us like we might be terrorists.”

With the outbreak of what appeared to be a civil war after the bombings of the Shia holy shrines of Al-Askari in Samarra in 2006, interpreters experienced a harsh plight. The violence and death toll reached unprecedented levels making it treacherous for interpreters who continued to stay in Iraq. Iraqi interpreters, hence, were left with no option but to face possible murder in Iraq or to endure the humility of living in a country neighboring Iraq. Since they helped America in Iraq, interpreters were perceived as traitors in Arab countries and they were resented in a growing anti-US environment. In this context, Packer interviewed an Iraqi interpreter who tried to resettle in Dubai and find a job. He revealed:
Yaghdan sent his resume to several companies in Dubai... He got a call from a legal office that needed an administrative assistant. “Did you work in the US?” the interviewers asked him. Yaghdan said that his work had been in Iraq... he could feel the interviewer pulling back. A man at another office said, “Oh, you worked against Saddam? You betrayed Saddam... what hurt Yaghdan most was the looks that said, “you trusted the Americans-and see what happened to you.”

Other interpreters ended up in rehabilitation hospitals in Jordan to get long-term treatment of serious injuries incurred during their work. In their Wall Street Journal article in 2007, Joel Millman and Gina Chon write of several interpreters they met who were critically injured: Adil suffered severe burns and undergone nine skin grafts; Diyer was in a coma and had his legs amputated below his pelvis; and Rabeh lost his two legs too while in patrolling. The hospital, unnamed in the article for fear of attacks, received about 100 wounded interpreters in 2006. Although Titan or L3 Communications paid interpreters’ medical bills and two-third of their salaries when under treatment, wounded interpreters were left handicapped and unable to work and provide for themselves and their families after they left the hospital. Thousands of interpreters, however, could not afford to travel abroad to resettle in Dubai nor could they obtain visas to other countries. Hence, they were remained behind in Iraq to live with the constant fear of being killed.

*The SIV Program Saved my Life*

When Lt. Col. Michael Zacchea left Iraq in 2005, he was torn. His yearlong mission to train an Iraqi Army battalion had left him wounded and emotionally drained, and he was eager to go. But leaving Iraq also meant leaving Jack, his Iraqi interpreter, to face an
insurgency that has made a point of brutalizing those who help the Americans. Col. Zacchea began working to ensure that Jack would not be left . . . It took two years for Jack to get a visa.44

Amid unforeseen level of chaos and violence and the apprehensions of the status of the US presence in Iraq, interpreters feared a scenario where the US troops would leave Iraq and would leave them behind. They had reasons to be fearful. Historically, the fate of natives who collaborated with a foreign military has been tragic. For instance, Iraqis who collaborated with the British forces after the occupation of Iraq in 1914 were attacked after the British forces pulled out from Iraq in the 1930s. More recently, during the fall of Saigon in 1975, one recalls the tragic fate of thousands of Vietnamese who collaborated with Americans but eventually ended up in “reeducation camps.” The National newspaper interviewed Bob, an Iraqi interpreter, who expressed his concerns on watching US forces pack their bags and prepare to leave. Bob comments,

They’re going to leave us behind. I can see that now . . . I believed all the promises from the soldiers that they’d take us with them, that we were their brothers, their buddies, their guys. But now they’re going and it’s obvious they’re not going to take us. We’ll be left here, we’ll be hung out to dry, we’ll be [expletive].44

The fear of being left behind was shared by the interpreters I interviewed. Working with the US Army since the invasion in 2003, Kamal was not intimidated by the threats to his life to quit, he pointed out that his sense of safety came from the assumption that the US forces would stay in Iraq for long years “I thought the US troops would stay in Iraq forever and I would be living in the base until things get improved. When US units started to pull out and US bases started to close, I got very scared as to what would happen to me.”45 Hence, interpreters
experienced intense fear which was compounded by a feeling of bitterness and helplessness. Meanwhile, the targeted murders against interpreters continued.

In response to the increasing number of casualties among interpreters and their plight, Americans started to come out to help them. In many cases, US Army officers, journalists, and other US officials took the responsibility of protecting their own interpreters by getting them out of Iraq. They frequently fought for visas for their interpreters and argued that it was a moral obligation to help those who helped America in Iraq. The most difficult problem, however, was that there was no legislation that allowed US immigration authorities to issue visas for these Iraqis. After losing his leg while patrolling with the US Army, my informant, Noor, escaped to Jordan:

I escaped with my family to Jordan in 2005. I wanted to get medical treatment and find a safe place to live. However, the experience proved bitter. My American friends tried to help me to get a visa to the US but they could not. I applied for a special refugee case based on the services and sacrifices that I offered to the US Army in Iraq, and based on the medical and military reports. But, I was stuck there and exhausted all my savings waiting for a visa. It took the US embassy in Amman four years to grant me refuge status in America.46

Kirk Johnson appeared as one of the most prominent advocates of the Iraqi interpreters’ cause. He was compared to Oskar Schindler, the German businessman who saved Jews from Nazi death camps.47 Johnson, a young man in his twenties, served in Iraq as an information officer with the U.S. Agency for International Development and then as an aid worker. He was one of the few Arabic-speaking Americans in Iraq. Johnson worked closely with US-affiliated Iraqis and became aware of their sacrifices and their risky lives due to their affiliation with
Americans. When Johnson returned to the US in 2006, he advocated the cause of US-affiliated Iraqis, attempting first to help his former Iraqi colleagues. At the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007, he established a nonprofit organization called the List Project, which filed the names of eligible US-affiliated Iraqis who needed urgent resettlement help. The List Project filed between 1,000 and 3,000 names. The organization won the commitment of 200 volunteer lawyers from top law firms to do a massive-scale pro bono endeavor to help the people on the list. Johnson, then, flew with his list to the U.S. Congress attempting to persuade the officials to expedite the resettlement process of the people on the list. He explained to the public, “many of these people have been threatened or tortured, their relatives have been raped or even killed all because they helped the United States. They were branded as collaborators, and the stain of collaboration does not evaporate.”

The US efforts started then to focus on calling for special legislation to protect Iraqi interpreters and allow them to immigrate to the US. Across the United States, the advocates of US-affiliated Iraqis became personally involved in these efforts. They created networks to help these Iraqis and they exerted pressure on the Bush administration to take its responsibility and issue legislation to save the lives of these Iraqis. In the past, special immigrant visas had been granted to Cambodians and Laotians who collaborated with the US during the Vietnam War. Special immigrant status was also granted to: religious workers (aliens who seek to enter the US to be employed full time by a bona fide nonprofit religious organization in the US); Panama Canal Company employees who, at the time of the Panama Canal Treaty of 1977, entered into force and worked for Panama Canal Company for at least 1 year or worked for 15 years and honorably retired from US government employment in the Canal Zone; International Organization Employees or their Family Members of certain long-term “G” and “N”
nonimmigrant employees of a qualifying international organizations; Physicians; Juvenile Court Dependents who are present in the US, unmarried and less than 21 years of age and declared dependent upon a juvenile court in the US; and Armed Forces Members who served honorably on active duty in the US armed forces after October 1978. In Iraq, the Spanish forces had already evacuated their local Iraqi employees when the Spanish government decided to pull out its troops from Iraq in 2004.

On the US government side, the strongest advocate of the cause of Iraqis interpreters was Senator Edward M. Kennedy. He argued that the United States had a moral obligation and a particular responsibility to resettle Iraqis with ties to the US: “The division in the Senate over the war in Iraq should not obscure the fact that all of us on both sides of the aisle agree that America owes an immense debt of gratitude to these Iraqis, and we have a special responsibility to help them. They have supported our efforts, saved American lives and are clearly at great risk because of it.” Moreover, high-ranking US government officials like Secretary of State, Condoleeza Rice, said that the issue was a priority for the current administration. The US veterans I interviewed also affirmed the moral responsibility of the US to help Iraqi interpreters. Jason points out, “we have moral obligation to interpreters. We put these guys in really awkward situation in their neighborhood and they were willing to take the risk. The fact they risked their lives to help us, this really should be repaid. I think any Iraqi interpreter who wants to come to the US should be allowed to.” Moreover, Captain Baker emphasized this moral obligation and wondered if these Iraqis could go back and re-integrate into the society they came from.

If we look more historically about what happened to people who collaborated with America whether in Vietnam or present day Iraq, America has a very poor track record of taking care of people who fought for her . . . The question is: can these people go back to
the society they came from? I think for many of them the answer is no, they are still
targets. It is not about their safety argument alone, there is another argument: do they
deserve to come to the US? And I think the right thing for my country is to honor their
sacrifices and the work they put on and give them the right to come over to America,
because they earned it and deserve it and not for any other reason other than that. 53

These efforts and demands were realized when the Bush administration issued in
December 2006 the first legislation to help Iraqi interpreters. Congress passed Public Law 109-
163 under section 1059 of the National Defense Authorization Act for the fiscal year 2006
making up to 50 Iraqi and Afghan translators working for the US military eligible for Special
Immigrant Visas (SIV). The immediate family members, spouses and children, of the recipient
were also eligible for visas. The law was applicable to Iraqi and Afghan interpreters. It did not
require that the applicant provide evidence that s/he experienced or was experiencing an ongoing
serious threat as a consequence of his/her employment by the US Army or US government.
However, an eligible applicant had to have worked for at least a year, obtain a letter of
recommendation from a General Officer or a Flag Officer, and file a Form 1-360 petition. The
applicant’s forms had to be reviewed by the Chief of Mission, the US Ambassador in Baghdad or
Kabul. The applicant’s documents were to be sent to the National Visa Center. They begin to
require the applicant other documents.

The law was a glimmer of hope for thousands of interpreters and was overwhelmingly
welcomed. However, it had disadvantages. The 50 available visas were very few in comparison
with the large number of potential applicants. The 50 visas were also shared by Afghan
interpreters which meant that there were only 25 visas available for Iraqis. Finally, the law
specified eligible applicants as only interpreters and excluded other Iraqi employees working with the US Army and US government in Iraq.

Despite these disadvantages and soon after its passage, hundreds of interpreters began the application process. The Iraqi interpreters in the US embassy had the advantage of having relationships with high officials which facilitated their immigration process. Cooper states, “as of June 2007, the United States had admitted 69 locally employed Iraqis on special immigrant visa status, with 93 more cases pending, State Department officials said. But the status, as defined by Congress, can be applied only to interpreters and translators, which excludes a range of Iraqis, from drivers to soldiers.”

The US government soon realized the inadequacy of the number of visas available. State Department officials pointed out, “the demand has far exceeded what we initially anticipated.” Six months after signing the first law, therefore, President Bush signed Public Law 110-36 on June 15, 2007 to amend section 1059 by expanding the total number of beneficiaries to 500 a year for the fiscal year 2007 - 2008. The other advantage of the new law was that only Iraqi interpreters were to be granted visas. It also made their immediate family members eligible for visas, and they were not counted toward the number of assigned visas for interpreters.

Although the new amended law expanded the number of assigned visas, the two laws did not offer interpreters an immediate solution. In fact, the requirements and bureaucratic procedures slowed down the application and resettlement process. According to my informants, the hardest requirement was to obtain a letter of recommendation signed by a General Officer or a Flag Officer. Kamal points out, “as local interpreters, we worked with lower ranks of military such as Sergeants, Lieutenants, and Captains. A General Officer would not know local interpreters personally. Therefore, it took me ten months just to obtain this letter.” Other
interpreters blamed the lack of legal assistance in clarifying the application process to them. Abdul explained, “we had to understand the law by ourselves and complete all the procedures without any legal assistance in the US bases. Nobody was familiar with the law at the beginning, even US military officers themselves. When we asked them to sign paperwork for us, they hesitated and took long time to understand how the SIV law worked.” Emphasizing the need for law experts to help interpreters file their applications, Firas also criticized what seemed disorganized and confused procedures. “I applied for the first law in 2006 and I arrived in America in 2009. There was automatic transfer of applications from law to law which caused some disorder in terms of who applied first. Those who applied for the second law in 2007 were lucky and were processed quickly, sometimes in one year.” Finally, the US officials admitted the delay in the SIV process. State Department officials said they were working with Congress and the Homeland Security Department to accelerate the SIV process. Moreover, the US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, sent a cable to Washington on July 2007 pressing the government to issue visas to Iraqi employee who worked with the US government.

Due to these barriers and the maxim quota of 500 visas, the number of SIV recipients in 2006 and 2007 was marginal compared to the actual number of applicants. According to a GAO report to Congressional Committees in 2010, based on data from the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security that “the United States issued 429 special immigrant visas in 2007 . . . and the United States received only 202 Iraqi refugees in 2006 and 1,608 refugees in 2007” The long processing time was also a frustrating issue. In its report about Iraq in 2009, Human rights first estimated the waiting time to process SIV applications to take a year or more. During this time, interpreters lived precarious situations and continued to face dangers in
Iraq. Many interpreters were murdered while they were waiting the long process of SIV to be completed. Captain Baker explains,

I was filling out Roy’s [his Iraqi interpreter] paperwork in an apartment in Chicago when I found out that he was killed. I started to work on his visa paperwork and we had a family member who helped us find out how to do visa application and we were waiting to get his security clearance and wait for him to come over, but unfortunately I never had the chance.62

Through its application in 2007, the two SIV laws proved inadequate. The laws could not meet the urgent need of resettlement for thousands of US-affiliated Iraqi interpreters. In addition, other Iraqi employees working with various US government agencies in Iraq, such as contractors, drivers, and general laborers, were pressing US officials to consider their applications for SIVs. They argued that they experienced the same risks as interpreters. Meanwhile, Multi-National Forces operating in the south of Iraq launched a large-scale endeavor to evacuate all their Iraqi employees, interpreters, or other employees, and resettle them. In this context, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced a program in August 2007 to offer permanent resettlement to Iraqis who worked with the British forces for at least 12 months. The decision came following public pressure to protect Iraqi interpreters after the brutal murder of 17 interpreters in Basra immediately after the withdrawal of British forces.63 The program offered Iraqi interpreters two options: a one-time financial bonus of $8,000 to help them relocate within Iraq, or permanent resettlement in Britain.64 Between 1,000 and 1,500 Iraqi and their families were airlifted from Basra to Britain.65 Simultaneously, in August 2007 Denmark airlifted 370 Iraqi employees with their families and granted them asylum in Denmark. Thomas Winkel, representative of the Danish Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs,
points out, “interpreters who had been working for the Danish military were given the choice of resettling within Iraq with financial help, or being given jobs at Danish mission in the region, or going to Denmark to apply for asylum with their families . . . Most chose to go to Denmark.”66 Similarly, Poland offered its 100 Iraqi interpreters and drivers resettlement in Poland or a one-time cash bonus of $40,000 if they chose to relocate within Iraq.67 Finally, the Australian government provided about 600 immigration visas to Iraqis who had worked for the Australian troops in southern Iraq.68

The US government realized the need for a drastic change in its policies to address the plight of Iraqi interpreters. The issue was further compounded by a wave of millions of refugees displaced on Iraqi borders seeking safe haven in Syria and Jordan. Many of these refugees in Iraq’s neighboring countries had affiliations with the US Army and US government in Iraq and had been ignored in the SIV programs. Once again, Senator Kennedy led a Congressional effort with Senator Gordon Smith to assist Iraqis who had close ties to the United States and also to help Iraqi refugees who were displaced in countries neighboring Iraq. “The Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act” was introduced by Kennedy in June 2007. The Act passed the Senate unanimously that fall of 2007 and then was signed into law in January 2008.

The passage of the Act represented a great shift in the Bush administration policy toward US-affiliated Iraqi interpreters and other Iraqi refugees. The Act brought great changes in that it significantly increased the total number of assigned SIVs, established new refugee/immigration programs, and expanded the logistical infrastructure and the refugee missions in the region to facilitate the processing of the applications.

First, the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act expanded the SIV program to allow 5,000 Iraqi, originally it was only 50 which then was expanded to 500, per year to immigrate to the US over
the next five years. This meant that the SIV program would allow 25,000 Iraqi to immigrate to
the US from fiscal year 2008 to 2012. The new SIV program included all Iraqis, interpreters or
other employees, who have been employed by the US Army and US government in Iraq for at
least one year. It also required that an eligible applicant should have experienced or was
experiencing an ongoing serious threat as a consequence of employment by the US government.
However, the new SIV program maintained almost the same other requirements of the previous
SIV programs: a letter of recommendation, Chief of Mission approval, and other basic required
documents and procedures.

Second, the Act established a new program called The Refugee Resettlement Program
which made 12,000 Iraqis eligible for refugee status in the US for the FY 2008 and 17,000 for
FY 2009. A major difference between the SIV program and the refugee program is that the SIV
holders receive their green cards upon entrance to the US, while refuge recipients are eligible to
apply for green cards only after spending one year in the US. According to the Center for
American Progress’s report on Iraq in 2009, the new refugee resettlement program prioritized
refugees into three categories. Priority1 (P1) was individuals with refugee cases where no
durable solutions exist. These refugees should have already registered with UNHCR and have
been referred to the program by UNHCR, NGO, or US embassies. P2 was Iraqis with US
affiliation, including Iraqis employed by the US government, media, NGOs, or any entity closely
associated with the US mission in Iraq. These Iraqi are eligible to apply regardless of how long
they worked. In addition, P2 included members of persecuted religious groups and Iraqis who
have close family members in the United States. P3 was the category of family reunification
cases involving spouses and unmarried children under 21.69
Third, the Act expanded the logistical support for processing applications of SIV and refugee cases. The State Department contracted with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to process the applications of the new refugee resettlement program for applicants in Jordan, Egypt, and Syria. Then, in June 2008, the refugee program made it possible for Iraqis with US affiliation to apply for the program in Iraq and to establish their well-founded fear that their lives were in grave danger while they were still living in Iraq. Simultaneously, for the first time the US embassy in Baghdad started to process SIV applications. In this way, US-affiliated Iraqis could apply to the SIV program or to the refugee program in Iraq by June 2008 without having to travel to Syria or Jordan.

Although the new SIV and the Refugee resettlement Programs allocated a large number of slots to bring Iraqi interpreters and other US-affiliated Iraqis to America, the actual number of recipients was low. In its report, Human Rights First pointed out, “many thousands of SIVs go unused. In FY 2008, the State Department issued only 4.7 % of the total number of SIVs available . . . and in the first half of FY 2009 it issued only 9.7 % of the available visas” The newly expanded SIV program demanded more requirements and paperwork than the first two which made the process even longer. Firas, for instance, spent two years in the process,

The new program required records of military service which was hard to obtain and required many new proofs and documents. I heard that there were fraudulent cases where non-Iraqis, who also served with Americans, obtained a letter of employment, fake Iraqi IDs, and applied for SIVs. Other Iraqis claimed affiliation with the US Army without adequate proof.

The Refugee Resettlement Program appeared to serve as an easier avenue for thousands of interpreters and other Iraqis with US affiliation to resettle in the US. Thousands of Iraqis with
US affiliation preferred to apply for Refugee Resettlement since it did not require difficult
documents to obtain, such as a letter of recommendation or a year of service. Therefore, the
number of Iraqis who were resettled through the refugee program was large. In its report on Iraqi
SIV and refugee recipients in 2010, a GAO points out, “the U.S. admitted 13,822 Iraqi refugees in
2008 and 18,838 in 2009.” Despite these numbers, the Refugee Resettlement Program, like the
SIV program, required a long time to process which meant that these applicants waited for years
before obtaining refugee status. Human Rights First reports, “the refugee resettlement process
would take from one to two years in Iraq and at least nine months in Jordan.” This long waiting
period exhausted applicants’ savings and forced many of them to make a deadly decision to
return to Iraq.

In both cases, the security concerns about bringing Iraqis to the US were an obstacle that
slowed down the SIV and refugee process. Despite the fact that all Iraqi interpreters and most
other Iraqi employees had obtained some security screening before being hired with the US
Army and government, they were required to obtain security clearance. Abdul explains, “the
security clearance took forever. You complete all the required forms and submit your documents
and you think you are done. However, you get disappointed when you realize that the security
clearance would take at least from six months to a year. That was completely frustrating.” The
US officials did not deny their security concerns and its effect on delaying the process of
granting SIVs. Constable reports:

State Department officials said the delays have stemmed in part from overburdened
consular offices in Iraq and nearby countries, and in part from the bottlenecks caused by a
need for exhaustive background checks by the Departments of Homeland Security,
especially for immigrants and refugees from Middle Eastern countries, in an era of
heightened terrorism concerns. Other concerns were revolving around the fact that these Iraqis were coming from conflict and war zone and they might be carriers of conflict and a source of violence outside Iraq.\textsuperscript{76}

Despite the disadvantages that appeared in the application of the SIV and Refugee Resettlement Programs, the two programs eventually saved the lives of thousands of Iraqi interpreters and other Iraqis with US affiliation. Dr. Marco considered the US efforts to assist Iraqi interpreters historically much better than what happened with the Vietnamese interpreters after the fall of Saigon in 1975,

If you look at the number of interpreters who have been killed in Iraq versus the number of Vietnamese whom we left in 1975 who ended up in reeducation camps, I don’t think there is any comparison. Iraqi interpreters were much better mainly because the situation on the ground was better. A lot of Vietnamese were left in Vietnam and ended up in reeducation camps. So I think we did better in Iraq in terms of helping interpreters.\textsuperscript{77}

Moreover, Dr. Marco thinks that after the US forces leaves Iraq, the conflict will shift and thus interpreters probably will not be targeted, “the conflict is no longer about America but it is about various groups in Iraq. The fact that a guy worked for America would not matter anymore since America is going. It is much more important that that guy is connected with Iran or Al Qaeda.”\textsuperscript{78} Contradicting this opinion, Ondiak and Katulis from the Center for American Progress in their 2009 report emphasized the great risks interpreters will be facing and presented a plan of airlifting US- affiliated Iraqis to the US or a third country. They recommend steps for the plan, and have asked President Obama to take immediate action about the issue arguing that the United States had engaged in airlift operation in the past in three cases: the evacuation of
Vietnamese refugees in 1975, the airlift of Iraqi Kurds in 1996, and the airlift of Kosovo Albanians in 1999.79

In this section, I reviewed the emergence of US moral obligation to assist Iraqi interpreters and discussed the SIV and refugee resettlement programs that were legislated for this purpose. Johnson Kirk and Senator Edward Kennedy were the most prominent advocates who called for special immigration legislation to save the lives of Iraqi interpreters. During two years, from 2006 to 2008, three SIV laws were legislated and passed: law 109-163 under section 1059 in 2006, law 110-36 in June 2007, and The Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act in January 2008. The three laws demanded applicants meet numerous requirements and had disadvantages when put into application. However, the legislations saved thousands of Iraqi interpreters and allowed them to immigrate with their families and start new lives in the United States.

**Feeling at Home: Iraqi interpreters’ experience of adjustment in America**

In the fall of 2007, Forat fled Iraq through a special immigrant visa for his work with the U.S. government . . . When he served as a civilian interpreter, he learned there were three basic rules to success in the Army: be on time, be in the correct uniform and always do the right thing . . . He landed in Pawtucket, R.I., where he soon became a New England Patriot fan, traveled to the Atlantic Ocean and enlisted in the U.S. Army reserve.80

The available literature on the resettlement of Iraqi interpreters in the US and the testimonies of my interviewees emphasize that since they worked with the US Army in Iraq for years, Iraqi interpreters appear to have a relatively smooth transition from Iraqi life to American life and a successful experience of adjustment in the US.81 In contrast to other immigrants and refugees who struggle to survive and start new lives, Iraqi interpreters came with advantages that
helped them adjust quickly in the US. The experience of working with US military provided interpreters with the opportunity to improve their English language skills and develop an American accent, familiarize themselves with the American work system, and provided them with some exposure to American culture and a network of American friends. In addition, interpreters were inclined to adopt an American lifestyle and were determined to fit in their new country. These advantages proved essential to facilitate their adjustment experience in the US.

According to GAO report in 2010, “the U.S. issued 4,634 special immigrant visas (SIV) for Iraqi interpreters from 2006 and 2009.” The report noted that 382 of them settled in Texas, 253 in California, 141 in Virginia, and the others were spread across the United States. In addition, a few thousand interpreters arrived as refugees. After working with the US Army for two years and waiting for his SIV for one year, Hadi got some familiarity with what life was like in the US. He describes his first days in the US,

Once I arrived to the airport, my former fellow Americans who served in Iraq received and welcomed me. I stayed the first night in a hotel. I spent the night browsing the internet looking for landlords and available housing. The next day, a US Colonel who served in Iraq helped me find an apartment which I rented the same day. He also took me to Kroger for shopping. The next day I went to Wal-Mart and bought a TV and got phone service. The third day I got cable service from Time Warner cable. The fourth day I started looking for bars, and so forth.

Emphasizing the smoothness of the transition, Noor, who arrived with his wife and child, said he felt at home, “Everything seemed familiar to me: people, language, culture, and lifestyle. It was not the first time I traveled in my life. I had lived in England and Jordan and traveled to
other countries. I feel that the United States is my home country and I adjusted very quickly here."\textsuperscript{85}

Iraqi interpreters arrived at a time when the US economy was facing a crisis. All interpreters I interviewed emphasized that the major challenge they faced in the US was finding decent jobs that suited their skills and degrees. Human Rights First reports in 2009: “in the current climate, arriving Iraqi refugees and SIV recipients are facing enormous challenges as they establish new lives in the United States. The troubled economy has exacerbated the weaknesses in a system that was already funded. Many are finding it increasingly difficult to obtain jobs.”\textsuperscript{86} However, most of my interviewed interpreters survived the economic hardship and found jobs. Noor found two jobs,

Because of my leg condition, I wanted to find a job close to my home. The language was the key to find a job. I volunteered to work as an interpreter in a re-settlement office helping new Iraqi refugees and I worked there for three months. Then, my wife and I started working in a Mediterranean Restaurant close to my home. Meanwhile, I found another part-time job as a translator for an organization. I do this work from home after I am done from the restaurant work. I am comfortable with my jobs and I am always looking for better opportunities.\textsuperscript{87}

Holding a degree in medicine, Hadi sought to resume his career as a physician in the US. However, he could not find a job right away. “It is a transitional period. I have to get by and find any job and meanwhile try to equalize my degree to US standards.”\textsuperscript{88} Capitalizing his experience as an interpreter with the US Army, Hadi found a job as a case manager in a refugee resettlement organization that assists newly arrived Iraqi refugees. Determined to succeed in the US, Firas put no option for himself to return to Iraq,
When I first arrived, I was single. But since I had decided to stay in the US forever, I got married to an Iraqi-American woman and I settled down well. I moved out of four different states looking for a good job. The economic situation is really tough, but I have the skills and willingness to work. I currently have three jobs. I work for a re-settlement organization as a translator helping newly arriving Iraqi families. I work in two other jobs and I make enough money.89

It was not only the language and education interpreters had that helped them start new lives in the US. Some of them were in a good financial position as a result of their employment with the US Army. In contrast to some interpreters, Abdul did not apply for resettlement benefits such as food stamps and Medicaid since he was better off. “I had a good amount of savings, so I did not need welfare. I started a small business and used the nickname that I had used when I was an interpreter to name my store.”90 Arriving with his wife and three children, Kamal applied for resettlement benefits which helped them get by for several months:

I know the system very well. The goal of the benefits was only to help the newly arrived SIV holders stand on their feet in the US. The US system ultimately wants you to depend on yourself and provide for yourself and your family. Hence, they would not offer enough assistance and would not make people dependent on the State assistances. If they offer people enough cash assistance and food stamps, no one would want to work.91

Soon after his arrival, therefore, Kamal started looking for a job. He worked as a cashier for six months and currently works as an electrician in a real estate company, “Things come by time. I need to start over my life first then I can study for a degree and improve my life prospects.”92
Iraqi interpreters also enjoyed successful social integration in the US. In my interviews with them, interpreters stressed the importance of having American friends in the US with whom they had worked in Iraq. Abdul points out, “my American friends greatly helped me survive in the US. They provided me with a social network without which I would not have been able to start my business or enjoy any social activities. I settled down where I am because of these friends.”93 In addition, there were cases when former US soldiers hosted their interpreters in their homes and helped them find a job. When Wadi arrived to the US, he had exhausted most of his savings. “I called my US boss and without asking for help he offered to host me in his home for unlimited time. Other American friends made efforts to find me a job. We met in war time when we fought side by side in Iraq, and I think now they are trying to make it up to me.”94 Noor had a specially warm welcome from the town he settled in. Seeing he lost a leg in Iraq while helping America, people embraced him and his family:

I was worried how people might react to my leg, but the only thing they did is thank me, welcomed me, and supported me in my new life. My American buddies invite me to parties and barbecues. Ladies from the town take my wife for sightseeing, and my son is becoming so American. These wonderful people make me feel reborn and feel at home.”95

Iraqi interpreters, therefore, adjusted quickly and successfully in the United States. They came over to America with very good English language skills that qualified them to enter the US job market. Three of my informants held jobs as interpreters in refugee resettlement organizations making use of their experiences in Iraq. Interpreters were also exposed to some aspects of American social life and American culture in Iraq due to their close communication with US soldiers in Iraq. Their network of American friends assisted them in their integrating
into US society. These skills and advantages reinforced interpreters’ confidence and helped them start new lives in the United States. Despite experiencing tremendous risks and challenges, my informants are proud of their experience of working for the US Army in Iraq and proud that some of their dreams are coming true: Wadi is studying for an M.A. in Linguistics, Abdul’s store, named after his interpreter’s nickname, is open for business, Kamal enjoys family barbecue on weekends, Firas is now married and has obtained a mortgages to buy a home. Hadi is in love with an American woman and plans to marry her, and Noor listens to Rihanna and feels at home.
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

In December 2011, US forces will withdraw completely from Iraq amid apprehensions about the ability of Iraqi security forces to keep order and fears of a possible collapse of security conditions in Iraq. My research is significant therefore because it comes at a critical moment when the destiny of thousands of local Iraqi interpreters, who risked their lives and their families to assist America in Iraq, is at stake. While I do not expect another “Saigon fall,” where one would see images of Iraqi interpreters escaping and racing to the US Embassy in the forfeited Green Zone in Baghdad or images of evacuating US helicopters hovering above Baghdad, I fear that these local Iraqis might be target in a large-scale revenge campaign by insurgents, such as the mass murder of interpreters in Basra that took place after the British withdrawal from Iraq in 2007.

The goal of my research was to make visible the experiences of local interpreters and to delineate the US’s moral responsibility in protecting their lives and rewarding their sacrifices. The roughly 20,000 Iraqis who decided to work as interpreters with the US Army in Iraq showed exceptional willingness and courage to support the cause of a new Iraq by assisting the US Army. Poorly prepared for linguistic and cultural challenges as in other previous foreign wars, the US faced serious challenges in filling linguistic positions. The number of US citizens with Arabic language capabilities who were recruited was severely limited. Hence, an immense need for hiring local Iraqis for interpretation and cultural services appeared once the US troops invaded Iraq in 2003. These local Iraqis provided the US Army with an abundant and cheap source of interpretation, cultural and mediation services without which US troops would not have had the ability to function in Iraq. The uniqueness of the experience of these interpreters, in
comparison with interpreters elsewhere, came from the nature of their critical positions in the battlefield and the realities on the ground which helped expand their roles beyond linguistic roles. They were critically essential in all missions that required interaction and communication with locals. In addition to facilitating their interaction, they helped bridge two different mindsets and cultures and saved American and Iraqi lives by averting serious cultural conflicts. These local interpreters also served as the “eyes and ears” for Americans in Iraq. They were an invaluable source of information since they could collect intelligence by their ability to move among different Iraqi neighborhoods and blend into multiple Iraqi communities. The bravery and services they provided qualify them to be considered as honorable members of the US armed forces and to be rewarded as the unknown soldiers of the Iraq war.

My research has also sought to obtain and make accessible to the public Iraqi interpreters’ testimonies on the risks they experienced and the difficult lives they led due to their work with the US Army in Iraq. Thus, hearing the interpreters’ stories in their own words is a critical means of winning public understanding and sympathy. My research reveals that these interpreters occupied a historically awkward and ambiguous position of natives who collaborated with invading forces. They were resented by some Iraqi communities that were hostile to the US military intervention that toppled Saddam Hussein’s regime. They were labeled as collaborators and agents of America. Hence, local interpreters were victims of the complexities of Iraq and its internal ethnic and political conflicts. These conflicts compounded the hardship of their lives making them very vulnerable to revenge and murder by insurgent groups.

In critically examining US efforts to assist local interpreters, my study concludes that the legislation that created Special Immigrant Visa programs was a serious and sincere endeavor to protect the lives of local Iraqi interpreters. Although at least 300 interpreters were murdered at
the hand of insurgents and militias and another unreported number of interpreters was lost, kidnapped, and murdered, the SIV programs saved thousands of interpreters’ lives. The programs have continued to grant visas to Iraqi refugees since 2008 and will be ended in 2012. A total of 25,000 immigrant visas will be granted to local Iraqi interpreters and their families. While this number of visas theoretically accommodates most interpreters, my research reveals that the actual number of SIV recipients has been fewer than the assigned and anticipated number of available slots. Hence, although my study emphasizes the significance of the legislation of SIV programs, it reveals many obstacles that slowed down the process of application and cut down the actual number of SIV recipients. According to the estimated total number of local Iraqi interpreters of 20,000 and the US official number of 4,634 of interpreters who were admitted to the US as of 2009, at least a few thousands of interpreters are still in danger in Iraq. Given the risks on the security of their lives, most of these interpreters in Iraq, except a few number of Kurdish interpreters in the Kurdistan region, wish to get the opportunity to re-settle in the US. Generally speaking, the SIV programs’ legislation represents a significant benchmark in US policies assisting foreign nationals who work with the US government and the US Army overseas. In the US, economic hardships and the challenge of finding decent jobs in this current economic crisis represent the most serious difficulty facing many of the interpreters transitioning into a new life in the US. For the most part, Iraqi interpreters appear to have transitioned smoothly into their new lives in the US, adjusting well culturally and socially thanks to their unique circumstances. In many ways, they may be seen as refugees whose distinctive experience of migration and settlement mark them as special immigrants in the US.

My study is one of the first and much-needed attempts to draw attention to the ordeals of local Iraqi interpreters who worked with the US Army in Iraq. It invites Americans to recognize
and honor these men and women, protect their lives, and assist them in their new lives in the US. As I conclude my study in May of 2011, many interpreters continue to wait to migrate to the US while living in fear in Iraq. US forces will leave Iraq in December 2011 and the SIV provisions will end in December of 2012. For many Iraqi interpreters who seek to follow in the footsteps of Noor and other interpreters, that leaves very little time for them to seek a new life in the country they served in Iraq.
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APPENDIX A

List of Participants in the Research

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APPENDIX B

Questionnaire for Iraqi interpreters

1- How old are you? What was your educational level in Iraq?

2- How and why did you learn English?

3- What were you doing before working as an interpreter for the US army in Iraq?

4- If you had chosen not to work as an interpreter, how would you have made use of your English in Iraq?

5- How long did you work as an interpreter for the US army in Iraq? What were your reasons for working as one?

6- What did you exactly do as an interpreter?

7- What was the significance of your work during the US intervention in Iraq?

8- Were there enough jobs for interpreters? What is your evaluation of the efficiency and skills of Iraqi interpreters?

9- Do you think that your job required special skills in addition to your being bilingual in Arabic and English?

10- How would you describe your relationship to your fellow interpreters, Americans, and your Unit? Was there mutual trust?

11- In your opinion, has your job helped your people and helped Americans? If yes, how?

12- Were there any risks involved due to your work? Did the US do enough to protect you?

13- Why did you immigrate to the US?

14- How did you immigrate to the US? Please, explain the process.

15- Who helped you when you first arrived in the US? Did you or your family receive any assistance- housing, medical care, food stamp, or orientation program? If yes, please explain.

16- What are the major challenges economical, cultural, and social that you are facing in the US?
17- What is your job now? And how did you get it?

18- How have Americans responded to your presence as an Iraqi and as an Iraqi interpreter in the US?

19- How do you evaluate your social adjustment in the US? Are you part of the Iraqi ethnic and social network in the US? And are you more comfortable in your social life to mix with other Iraqis or with Americans?

20- In your opinion, how has your experience in working for the US army in Iraq acted positively or negatively on your adjustment in the US?
Questionnaire for US Veterans

1- What in your rank in the military? How long did you serve in Iraq? Where?

2- After serving in Iraq, what do you think you needed to know the most about Iraqi culture before being deployed there?

3- In your opinion, was the United States well prepared to meet the challenge of communicating with Iraqi populace before the invasion?

4- Are you aware of the use of electronic devices for translation purposes in the Iraq war? If yes, what do you think of their effectiveness?

5- Was there shortage in interpreters’ number? Explain.

6- Were there situations when a misunderstanding/trouble happened with local Iraqis due to the unavailability of the linguistic communication “an interpreter”?

7- How many Iraqi interpreters have you worked with? What did they exactly do?

8- What is your evaluation of the role Iraqi interpreters played to help the US mission in Iraq?

9- In your opinion, have Iraqi interpreters helped local Iraqi people? Explain.

10- How do you see Iraqi people’s reaction towards Iraqi interpreters?

11- How do you see the limitations and strengths of Iraqi interpreters?

12- Were Iraqi interpreters allowed to suggest policies/ideas in how to tackle things in Iraq or how to deal with local Iraqis?

13- Have you worked with Iraqi female interpreters? If yes, what are the challenges they face due to their jobs?

14- What struck you the most about Iraqi interpreters?

15- How many Americans or Arab Americans, do you know of, in your unit who served as interpreters? How Iraqi people responded to them? How do you see the difference between an Arab-American interpreter and a local Iraqi interpreter?

16- In your opinion, did Iraqi interpreters represent potential threat on Americans? Have Americans trusted their Iraqi interpreters?
17- Do you think Iraqi interpreters were at risk due to their job? What challenges did they face due to their jobs?

18- As a US veteran who worked with Iraqi interpreters, do you think that US has any obligation to help Iraqi interpreters?

19- What do you think of the SIV program?

20- Have you attempted to help your former Iraqi interpreters? Do you help them in the US?
March 26, 2010

TO: Wisam Qusay Majeed  
ACS

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.  
HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project No.: H10C248GE7

TITLE: Negotiating US Culture: A Study of Iraqi Interpreters who Immigrated to the US

You have met the conditions for approval for your project involving human subjects. As of March 25, 2010, your project has been granted final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). This approval expires on March 14, 2011. You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and you must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.

You are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB and to use only approved forms. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures (including increases in the number of participants), please send a request for modifications immediately to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me, in writing (fax: 372-6916 or email: hsr@bgsu.edu) upon completion of your project.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

Comments/ Modifications: 
Stamped consent letter is coming to Wisam via campus mail.

Reviewer Comment: A university office would be more secure than your apartment (for storing research materials).

c: Dr. Sridevi Menon

Research Category: EXPEDITED #7
September 17, 2010

TO: Wisam Qusay Majeed  
ACS

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.  
HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project #: H10C248GE7

TITLE: Negotiating US Culture: A Study of Iraqi Interpreters who Immigrated to the US

The Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) has reviewed the requested modifications you submitted for your project involving human subjects. Effective September 16, 2010, the following modifications have been approved:

1. Expand the research on the experience of Iraqi interpreters by focusing on three aspects: role in the American intervention in Iraq in 2003, immigration process, and resettlement and adjustment in the US.
2. Expand pool of informants to be interviewed to include American veterans of the Iraq war, American official who served in the war, and an Arab American interpreter who served in Iraq.

You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. The consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and, if it is a revision to previously approved document(s), supersedes those versions. Copies of the dated document(s) must be used in obtaining consent from research subjects.

If you seek to make any additional changes in your project activities, complete the Request for Modifications/Addendum application and submit it to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me in writing upon completion of your project (fax: 419-372-6916 or email: hsr@bg.edu).

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

COMMENTS: Stamped consent documents are coming to you via campus mail.

C: Dr. Sridevi Menon
My name is Wisam Qusay Majeeed. I am a graduate student doing my M.A. degree in American Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University. I would like to conduct a study about the Iraqi interpreters who worked with the US army in Iraq and immigrated to the US. I will be focusing on the interpreter’s role in filling the linguistic and cultural gap between Americans and Iraqis and their immigration and adjustment experience in the United States. My research is for my M.A. thesis. The goal of my study is to draw attention to the Iraqi interpreters who served in the US army in Iraq, and to highlight their need for support to start their new lives in the US.

To conduct my research, I would like to interview you as you are an American veteran or official who served in Iraq. Your convenience in participating in this research is my priority. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw your participating whenever you like and without any penalty. If you choose not to participate, that will never affect our personal relationship or your relationship to Bowling Green State University. In addition, I am willing to answer any questions or concerns you have. I will be interviewing ten Iraqi interpreter/immigrant/ or refugee and other US veteran and official who served in Iraq. The research will take me about seven months and your role in the research as a participant is to answer a questionnaire of about 20 questions.
The expected that you will spend on answering and participating in the research is about one hour. If you are willing to participate, I will discuss with you what would be a convenient time for you to conduct the interviews with you either over the telephone or face to face. We can arrange several phone calls if you are not comfortable to answer all the questions in one phone call, and we can take a break during the phone call whenever you wish. There are no risks associated with this study except those encountered in normal life. There might not be direct benefits for you as a participant in the research, but the study will offer you an opportunity to share your work experience in Iraq. It will also be very useful for the Iraqi interpreters and refugees’ cause because the study will provide important insight into the particular challenges Iraqi interpreters/refugees face in the US. The study will attempt to draw public attention to the critical role of Iraqi interpreters who risked their lives in assisting the US army in Iraq. This project is one of the first studies in American Culture Studies to focus on the issue of Iraqi interpreters who assisted the US Army in Iraq. Please, before you email me your consent letter, clear your browser cache and page history.

I would also like to assure you that your name and identity will be kept confidential if you wish. I will save all the tapes in a locked drawer in my apartment, and I will keep the key in a very safe place in my apartment. After I finish the research, or if you ask me to, I will destroy all the tapes.

If you would like to have further information or you have any question, you can contact me any time via my cell phone (419 378 2820), or my email (wmajeed@bgsu.edu), and you can contact my supervisor, Dr Sridevi Menon, at (419 372 7119), or at her email (smenon@bgsu.edu). If you have questions about the conduct
of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu).”

Thank you very much.

I have been informed of the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

Note: please, check the box if you agree on your interview to be audio taped. □

Signature

Date
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To conduct my research, I would like to interview you as you are an Iraqi who is now in the US as an interpreter, immigrant, or refugee. Your convenience in participating in this research is my priority. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw your participating whenever you like and without any penalty. If you choose not to participate, that will never affect our personal relationship or your relationship to Bowling Green State University. In addition, I am willing to answer any questions or concerns you have. I will be interviewing ten Iraqi interpreter/immigrant/ or refugee and other US veteran and official who served in Iraq. The research will take me about seven months and your role in the research as a participant is to answer a questionnaire of about...
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[ ]

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