REHLET IRAQI (AN IRAQI JOURNEY)

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*Rehlet Iraqi* was created to depict an Iraqi refugee family’s struggle after fleeing war-torn Iraq. Their struggle is highlighted with hope and high expectations for a better life within the United States. This film emphasizes the toll that emigration has on the life of a family before and after their arrival to Grand Rapids, Michigan.
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Rehlet Iraqi was created to depict an Iraqi refugee family’s struggle after fleeing war-torn Iraq. Their struggle is highlighted with hope and high expectations for a better life within the United States. This film emphasizes the toll that emigration has on the life of a family before and after their arrival to Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Description

In 2003, under President George W. Bush, the United States launched a War on Terror in Iraq with the objective of 1) disarming Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, 2) ending Saddam Hussein’s support of terrorism, and 3) freeing the Iraqi people (Milbank and Allen 1). Saddam Hussein, a dictator who ruled Iraq for over thirty-five years, was overthrown, and the country was plunged into chaos. This manifested primarily as an ongoing conflict between its various sects; Muslims, Kurds, Assyrian, Christians, Turks, and Armenians.

Most of the people in current Iraq practice Islam, and the vast majority of Iraq are Arabs. Islam plays a major role in the lives of most Iraqis. The Islamic religion has its own sects system, with the two dominant being Sunni (the traditionalists) and Shi’a (the followers of Ali). The two Islamic sects share common traditions, beliefs, and doctrines, yet are divided by certain ideological beliefs. In Iraq it has also turned into a battle over power.

While the nation-state by its nature aimed to homogenize society, during his presidency, Saddam further suppressed the rights of minorities and groups he perceived as threatening. During the Iraq-Iran war, Saddam specifically heightened his aggression against the Shi’a who statistically comprised a majority in Iraq. In his hope to mobilize the Muslim neighbors against Shi’a Iran, he promoted the conflict as between two paths; the Sunni being the right path of Islam.
and the Shi’a being the wrong path of Islam. Nevertheless, “Although Saddam Husain was a Sunni Muslim who committed most of his atrocities against the Shia majority, such attacks never created a hostile relationship between the Sunni Iraqis and the Shia Iraqis” (Nakash 60).

The Shi’a-Sunni conflict in Iraq today is primarily not about theology, but rather political gain, belief and power. This dichotomy was initiated in Iraq under Saddam’s regime.

And the Shi’ites and Sunnis are going to be defined in that way. It’s not a matter of whether you go to mosque or how you stand in prayer. Those become essentially your identity markers. But the much bigger fight that’s occurring everywhere — and Iraq has really begun this — is about who owns power and how are resources distributed.

(Hunter)

With the ousting of Saddam from power, the Sunni and Shi’a relations, which were already complicated, took a much more destructive turn. On February 22, 2006, unknown persons bombed the Al-Askari mosque in Samarra Iraq, a holy Shia site. Political analysts and media presented the al-Askari attack as the start of the much anticipated sectarian civil war. Days following the attack, the streets of Iraq were full of bloodshed when the Sunni and Shi’a sects started attacking each other. They planted bombs and explosive devices, which in turn, triggered a civil war. Millions of Iraqis were forced to flee Iraq when this sectarian violence broke out.

Rehlet Iraqi, meaning an Iraqi journey, follows the struggle of an Iraqi refugee family, who became one of the victims during the ongoing strife. Mixed Sunni-Shi’a families also became targets of sectarian violence in Iraq. The Ahmed family fled Iraq in 2006 after enduring threats. In addition to highlighting conflicts within the family itself, Rehlet Iraqi underlines the difficulties they faced, from fleeing Iraq, to their temporary stay in a Syria, and then to their transition to a new beginning in the United States.
Initially, the U.S. failed to respond appropriately. Eventually, with the support and encouragement of UN agencies and neighboring countries, refugees began to settle in the United States. One of the thousands of families that sought asylum in the U.S. was the Ahmed family.

Hassan, the father, was an electrical engineer working as an architect in Baghdad and is part of the Sunni sect. His wife, Methaq, is a homemaker who is part of the Shi’a sect. The simple fact that they were from opposing sects prompted by a religious leader to force them to divorce in 2006, an act that would have been preposterous before the war. Methaq was forced to relocate to southern Iraq with her six children, while Hassan remained in the predominately Sunni northern Iraq. By the summer of 2006, the family quickly reunited and fled their home as refugees to neighboring Syria, where they stayed until April 2010.

Figure 1. Map showing number of displaced Iraqis, 2008 (UNCHA).
The Ahmed family lived in Jaramana, which is a city in Damascus, in southern Syria until April 2010. “Because of ensuing sectarian violence and fear of religious persecution, 1.5 million Iraqis were displaced in the aftermath of the Samarra mosque attack” (Abramowitz 3).

The United States is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which obligates the country to create programs and provide assistance to states housing refugees, and assistance to anyone, who fits the definition of refugee. A refugee is defined by the 1951 convention as: Article 1A (2) of the Convention, which defines a refugee as someone suffering from a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” (Good 1)

The 1951 Convention obligates the United States, as a participant in the Iraq War, to provide assistance to the host countries of refugees. One organization that provides assistance is the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The agency’s primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and wellbeing of refugees. It strives to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another state, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country. One of the UNHCR’s principles on Internal Displacement: “Internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State (Country) border” (Chan 235).

Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act

In June 2007 the United States introduced the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act, implementing a
Priority 2/P2 processing status for Iraqi refugees living in Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt:

To apply for resettlement without first needing an individual referral from the UN refugee High agency or UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) a U.S. embassy, or a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), they can directly approach an outpost of the U.S. refugee admission program to begin their process [to the United States]. (Epstein and Templeton 6)

This act sped up the process for resettlement and was the first Act to defy international law allowing Humanitarian organizations to resettle IDPs (internally displaced persons) within their recognized state (Epstein and Templeton 2). Iraqi refugees living within Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt who have attained P2 status would experience shorter time spans before relocation to an industrialized nation.

Syria was not included in the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act, because of political tensions that arose between the United States and Syria after the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister in 2005; the United States felt Syria was responsible for the assassination.

In 2005, after the assassination, former United States President George W. Bush withdrew the United States ambassador from Syria, cut off all aid to the country, and put Syria on the list of the axis of Evil for “supporting terrorism.” Therefore, Iraqi Refugees living in Syria have a longer processing time through the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) while awaiting resettlement. For fear of their lives, the Ahmed family didn’t return to Iraq in order to obtain the P2 processing status; instead they waited for four years in Syria.

Syria was not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and currently holds no binding obligation to the estimated 1.2 million Iraqi refugees living within their borders (O’Donnell 11). Despite the fact Syria isn’t a 1951 Refugee Convention signatory, they spend an estimated $1 billion annually hosting Iraqi refugees in refugee camps, providing education for children and emergency health care for all Iraqi refugees (O’Donnell 13).
The current United States President, Barak Obama has only made political promises to help provide aid, at Camp Lejeune. The president declared:

America has a strategic interest – and a moral responsibility – to act. In the coming months, my administration will provide more assistance and take steps to increase international support for countries already hosting refugees; we’ll cooperate with others to resettle Iraqis facing great personal risk; and we will work with the Iraqi government over time to resettle refugees and displaced Iraqis within Iraq – because there are few more powerful indicators of lasting peace than displaced citizens returning home.” (Refugee International, par. 4)

In May 2009, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) informed the Ahmed family they were accepted for resettlement within the United States, thus initiating the final resettlement process. Initially, the Ahmed family was unaware of the exact duration of the resettlement process, but knew that within six months to a year, they would be living in the United States. They registered with UNHCR in Syria in 2006 and didn’t move to United States until 2010, almost four years later.

The necessary multi-agency security clearance process appears to lack adequate staffing or coordination among agencies, and often leaves Iraqis and other refugees and immigrants languishing in destitution or danger abroad for months or years while their applications wait for approval in Washington. (Baldor 3).

The documentary follows the Ahmed family from Jaramana, Syria during the summer of 2009, to Grand Rapids, Michigan, United States in spring 2010, and a follow up six months later during fall 2010. The documentary sheds light on the struggle millions of Iraqi refugees face through one family’s journey; life in a refugee camp awaiting resettlement and arrival into Western society and exploring what measures the Ahmed family is willing to take in order to survive within the United States when government aid ceases.

Being out of school and awaiting resettlement for over four years left the Ahmed girls with a great deal of time on their hands. Rather than spend the down time thinking about their reality, the girls turned to art to occupy their minds and to give themselves a sense of life. The
girls turned their emotions, thoughts, and feelings into art. The girls have depicted their experience of war, separation, reunion, and life in poverty by using paint, canvas, clay, soap, nails, wires, poetry, and fashion design drawing.

Through this outlet, the Ahmed girls were able to, in a sense, deal with their struggles and provide themselves with a sort of self-therapy during their difficult situation. In addition to creating art, they also have sold their art to earn a small income for their family.

The Ahmed family landed in Grand Rapids, Michigan in the United States on April 13, 2010. I followed with the family six months later when the federal support, supplied through the LSSM, Lutheran Social Services of Michigan, came to an end and the family became responsible for their own finances. *Rehlet Iraqi* examined how effective the federal programs are for assimilating refugees.
PREPRODUCTION RESEARCH

Purpose

The primary aim of Rehlet Iraqi is to expose the devastating consequences that the Iraq war had on millions of average families, including effects on employment, living, education, child care, and most importantly, physical and mental health. Moreover, the war had created conflicts within families themselves as illustrated by the two attempts by Muna, the Ahmed family’s 17-year-old daughter, to commit suicide.

The uncertainty about their future in addition to unstable living conditions experienced by Iraqi refugees, children and adults alike, often causes permanent psychological trauma. The most devastating fact of the current situation is that the status of Iraqi refugees has been forgotten. Media coverage is oblivious to the lives of the more than 75,000 refugees now living in the United States. The United States government deems these families as self-sustainable after six months. Rehlet Iraqi explores these outcomes through the eyes of the Ahmed family.

Style and Approach

Rehlet Iraqi maintains observational and poetic personal portrait modes outlined by Bill Nichols in his book Introduction to Documentary. The voice of the documentary emphasizes the struggle displaced Iraqis have been experiencing since 2003 and uses the personal portrait mode to reveal a repressed collective identity among Iraqi refugees. “A personal portrait documentary takes up social issues from a personal perspective (164), [and can reveal] Collective Identities formed by [the] active choice to adopt and defend the practices and values of a given group.” (151) The Ahmed family’s journey conveys the Iraqi refugee struggle to survive during time of
The documentary reveals a political voice by focusing on the Iraqi refugees as a collective whole:

[through] the construction of national identity in terms of a melting pot of homogeneity, the challenges to this construct associated with political confrontation, the emergence of an identity politics that give voice to suppressed minorities, and acknowledgements of the hazards of categories and identities themselves in the event of catastrophic events, trauma and exile. (163)

Additionally, the film consists of interviews with the family that portrays the family’s collective identity as exiled refugees. All seven children were instructed by me to take pictures throughout their journey for use in the documentary. This conveys their point of view of their surroundings, allowing the audience to glimpse the world through the children’s eyes.

Rehlet Iraqi also maintains a non-traditional observational style while filming the Iraqi family within the housing quarters and cafés. Though mostly observing, I didn’t refuse interaction with anyone on camera if they initiated it. The documentary also contains investigative qualities in its approach to United States policies in Iraq, and whether the United States is doing everything it can to help the refugees. More importantly, the film poses the question, “Is six months enough time for a refugee family to become self-sustainable?” The answer is conclusive to the viewer upon simple observation. It also provides insight to through the Ahmed family’s experience struggle to remain united. The viewer will be able to form their own opinion about the repercussions of the war that has forced so many Iraqis into exile.

Moreover, Rehlet Iraqi conveys a sense of Ahmed’s journey poetically. I juxtaposed images to “represent reality in terms of a series of fragments, subjective impressions, incoherent acts, and loose associations” (Nichols 103). Through creative editing techniques, the viewer can further extract meaning from the images providing a more in depth look at the depths of the families’ struggles.
Goals of the Production

In 2008, I came across a fundraiser at a local mosque in Dallas that was collecting donations for Iraqi refugees who couldn’t make ends meet. As I started asking questions, most of these refugees had only been living in the United States for less than a year, and the federal government had stopped providing aid after only six to eight months. I decided to do some further research and I was shocked to find that this problem was not confined just to Dallas; it is an ongoing nationwide crisis. Having come from a Middle Eastern background, and having maintained a thorough interest in current affairs, I was perplexed that I wasn’t aware of this situation.

This prompted me to start doing in-depth research on the matter and I eventually made the trip to Syria, where I met the Ahmed family and learned about the situation first-hand. This documentary exposes the ongoing refugee struggle to the common American, who may not know this situation is occurring in the United States. Additionally, the documentary sheds light on why Iraqi refugees are having a difficult time living in the United States, and explores problems such as the culture barrier, to the lack of decent employment.

As a documentary filmmaker, I could have easily produced the entire film from within the U.S. What makes this film unique, however, is that it juxtaposes refugee life overseas with new life in the United States, and thus effectively provides the viewer with a first-hand picture of this important predicament.

Feasibility

I was born and raised in Syria, and I visit the country regularly to see family. As a result, I have seen a separate Iraqi refugee crisis-taking place in Syria, which neighbors Iraq. After
visiting various NGOs, including the Red Cross and the United Nations High Commotion for Refugees (UNHCR), I finally came across an event that was supporting young Iraqi artists. I met Noor and Muna, the two eldest daughters of the Ahmed family, who were trying to sell their homemade paintings at this event. Through these young women, I was introduced to the marvelous story of the Ahmed family.

Each of the many families that I met in Syria had a tragic story and selecting the appropriate family to film was not an easy task. I was drawn to the Ahmed family because Noor and Muna were very driven, and their maturity level was astonishing. They expressed their ambition for a better life through their paintings, and that immediately drew me to their family.

I consider myself fortunate because I was born and raised in Syria and I have lived in the United States for eleven years and thus have a dual residency. In Syria, I was easily able to access transportation and gain filming permits from the appropriate ministries. In the United States, I was also able to acquire filming permits, file the appropriate release forms, and have regular access to filming equipment at the University of North Texas Department of Radio, Television, and Film. The entire project was very feasible due to the simple fact that I was acclimated to both cultures.

Intended Audience

*Rehlet Iraqi* targets a variety of audiences including artists, anthropologists, and the general American public. Noor, Muna, and Anfal are all artists who use art to convey the traumatizing experiences of war, resettlement, poverty, and new life in the United States. Artists will find interest in following the story of other artists who have used art as a tool to survive and tell their personal story. The film will also interest anthropologists, who will find significance in
the Ahmed family’s transition to different places around the world and their sustained solidarity. *Rehlet Iraqi* will also benefit the general American public due to the fact that this issue, an important and pertinent issue in society, is largely unknown due to poor media coverage.

**Subject Matter Research**

The event at the local mosque fundraiser in Dallas in 2008 opened my eyes to the harsh reality of refugee life in the US. I was introduced to several families who expressed their struggles as well as their pride and patriotism. It was clearly a point in their lives that was both embarrassing yet empowering. This was the point where I was determined to create a documentary that thoroughly covered the issue of Iraqi refugees in the US. However, I was uncertain as to how I would approach the subject.

After consulting my mother, who works for the United Nations Development Program in Syria, I learned that there was a massive Iraqi refugee crisis in Syria as well. She was active in the community in aiding the ailing situation of the refugees that were becoming more unmanaged in the streets of Damascus. This prompted me to make the trip to Syria in the summer of 2009 for further research.

Through networking and connections from my mother, I was able to gain access to refugee camps and various NGO’s including the Red Cross, Red Crescent, and the UNHCR. I was shocked at the volume of refugees but intrigued with each having a unique and tragic story ranging from prostitution to murder. I spent three weeks moving back and forth between camps and registration centers on a mission to find the perfect subject to film. I finally came across a fundraising event that was hosted by a church to motivate young artists to pursue their dreams. Here, I met one of the daughters of the Ahmed family, Noor and I was drawn to her phenomenal
painting ability. As her story unraveled and she introduced me to her entire family, I was struck by the family’s collection of rich personalities. The other daughter, Muna’s maturity and intellectual capacity was well ahead of her sixteen years. Her father, Hassan, mentioned that his family had been officially qualified to migrate to the US, but was unsure about the exact date. At this point, I decided that the Ahmed family would be the subject of my film, as they would richly and effectively reflect the journey of an average Iraqi family turned refugees.

Characters

Rehlet Iraqi focuses on the Ahmed family, a family of refugees from Iraq. The family is composed of nine members; Hasan 49 (father), Meithaq 38 (mother), Noor 18, Muna 17, Anfal 13, Zainab 12, Aya 7, Hamza 5, and Hussam 3.

The father, Hassan Ahmed, who is also known as Abo Hamza, has a masters degree in electrical engineering and worked as an Architect in Iraq. The mother, Meithaq Ahmed, who is also known as Om Hamza, is a full time mom. The Ahmed girls have responded to the war through art. Throughout the course of their traumatic journey from Iraq, the girls artistic development can be clearly seen across a variety of art forms. The initial focus of the documentary was on Noor, the oldest daughter. Her art has been exhibited at several galleries in Syria hosted by humanitarian organizations, including the UNHCR.

Funding

Rehlet Iraqi’s overall cost from pre-production to post-production came out to be a total of $137,841. The total cost includes equipment, crew, meals, transportation, lodging, airfare, as well as other miscellaneous expenses.
The in kind donations, which financed a big portion from the total cost, consisted of school equipment, donations, and cash on hand, totaling $108,160. No grant money was secured so the remaining cost of $29,681 is projected to be covered by distribution payments.

Distribution Possibilities

While my documentary is in its final stage, distribution is right around the corner. My distribution plan is to have *Rehlet Iraqi* offered for public screening throughout various distributors including but not limited to:

- Direct Cinema Limited - Santa Monica, California
- Arab Film Distribution - Seattle, Washington
- DOCSTAR - Paris, France
- Full Frame Festival - Durham, North Carolina
- Sydney Arab Film Festival – Sydney, Australia
- Arab Film Festival - San Francisco, California

Additional festival distribution will include nationally and internationally recognized documentary film festivals. *Rehlet Iraqi* will target distribution that focuses on immigration, social conflict, and human rights. The international festival circuit includes but is not limited to:

- Berlin International Film Festival - Berlin, Germany
- SXSW Film Festival - Austin, Texas
- New Directors/New Films - New York Premiere - New York
- Full Frame Documentary Film Festival - Durham, North Carolina
- Flahertiana Film Festival - Perm, Russia
- Maryland Film Festival - Baltimore, Maryland
• Silverdocs: Discovery Channel Documentary Festival – Silver Spring, Maryland
• Sydney Film Festival - Sydney, Australia
• Durban Film Festival - Durban, South Africa
• Karlovy Vary International Film Festival - Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic
• Pesaro Film Festival - Pesaro, Italy
• Melbourne International Film Festival - Melbourne, Australia
• Napa Sonoma Film Festival - Napa Valley, California
• Edinburgh International Film Festival - Edinburgh, Scotland
• Sarajevo Film Festival - Sarajevo, Bosnia
• Vancouver Film Festival - Vancouver, Canada
• Viennale-Vienna International Film Festival - Vienna, Austria
• Arab Film Festival- San Francisco, California
• Arabic Film Festival- Richmond, Virginia
• International Documentary Festival (DOK.FEST) Munich – Germany
• International Documentary Film festival – Amsterdam, The Netherlands
• Big Sky Documentary Film Festival - Missoula, Montana
• Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival - Hot Springs, Arkansas
• A Film For Peace- Medwa, Italy
• AFI DALLAS Intl. Film Festival – Dallas, Texas
• Austin Film Festival- Austin, Texas
• Middle eastern Studies Association- MESA- Toronto, Canada
• DOXA Documentary Film Festival- Vancouver, Canada
• Dubai Intl. Film Festival- Dubai, United Arab Emirates
• Dublin International Film Festival – Dublin, Ireland
• Hot Docs – Toronto, Canada
• Seattle International Film Festival – Seattle, Washington
• Abu Dhabi Film Festival- Abu Dhabi- United Arab Emirates.
• Iraq short Film Festival- Baghdad, Iraq
POST-RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMS EFFECTIVENESS

In the dawn of 2003, Iraq was an entirely different country, and as a result of the War on Terror, a huge number of Iraqi families became displaced. Contrary to popular belief the largest outpouring of people didn’t take place in 2003, it occurred after the bombing of Al-Askari mosque in Samarra in 2006. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an agency mandated to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide, conducted a study that estimated that there are now over two million Iraqis who have fled their homes to other countries. About ten percent of these refugees have registered with the UNHCR, the necessary first step for resettlement. The UNHCR launched a referral program that considers refugees for resettlement to the United States in collaboration with the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM).

The PRM is currently providing assistance, humanitarian aid, and ensuring that humanitarian principles are thoroughly integrated into U.S. foreign and national security policy. Each refugee approved for admission to the U.S. is sponsored by a resettlement agency, participating in the Refugee Admissions Reception and Placement (R&P) Program under a cooperative agreement with the US State Department. These agencies cover the immediate needs of the families and provide funds for six to eight months to help them get started in their new world. After six to eight months, they are expected to be self-sustainable and will have to pay back the airfare that brought them to America.

LSSM, the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service in Grand Rapids, Michigan sponsored the Ahmed family. This resettlement agency provided them with transportation, housing, medical care, English classes, and financial aid. However, Hassan, the father, was unable to obtain employment and still has not, a year later, found a stable job. This is not
uncommon among Iraqi refugees in the United States, as the language and cultural barrier compounded by the psychological and physical trauma from the war makes it extremely difficult to acclimate to American society within six to eight months. Many Iraqis will have exhausted their resources provided to them by the resettlement agencies and become at risk facing homelessness.

In the situation of the Ahmed family, not only is there a conflict between their pride and the acceptance of aid, but there is also an internal family struggle to retain their cultural values at home, values that are in some instances in complete opposition to American traditions. One example of this cultural barrier is Mr. Ahmed’s struggle to maintain authority over the family. His behavior mirrors that of the Iraqi people in the days of Hussein’s regime. Having been socialized in such a patriarchal society, coping with the openness of American society has proven difficult.

One of the biggest challenges currently facing the Ahmed family is unemployment. Although Hassan is an electrical engineer, it is especially difficult to find employment in an already saturated job market, let alone adapt to a job where he is expected to be proficient in English.

It is important to mention that the Ahmeds are a unique case and received a house from a local church member. Most refugee families are forced to abide by the six to eight month assistance period from the Refugee Admissions Reception and Placement Program.

Americans are unaware of the plight that faces these refugees so shedding light on this issue is important for them as well as the Iraqi families. The cultural differences between Iraq and the U.S. make it arduous to adapt to, understand, and live in an entirely different society, let alone doing so in a constrained time period. As a result, a new study is necessary to re-examine
the refugee system in the United States. This study needs to take into account language and cultural barriers, as well as employment restrictions. Refugees arrive from all walks of life, some are educated and some are illiterate in their native language, and thus a system with more flexibility is necessary.
IRAQI WOMEN

As mentioned earlier, my initial draw to the Ahmed family came from the maturity and drive of the two eldest daughters, Noor and Muna. Their ambition and determination to create a better life was inspiring. In order to fully understand their plight, and what makes their drive so inspirational, a brief history of the status of Iraqi women, along with a general explanation of the psychological issues that accompany the family’s resettlement experience are necessary. I must stress that this is not an in-depth analysis of how Iraqi women’s movements and influence have changed over the last few decades, but rather a brief description in order to shed light on the status of women in current day Iraq.

The roles of women are integral in Iraqi society. Iraqi women have generally enjoyed more rights in comparison to other Middle Eastern countries. This has allowed them to make significant contributions in the fields of politics, art, and education. However, their status has changed significantly over the past few decades.

When the Ba’ath Party came into power in 1963, it granted women equal rights to their male counterparts. Such rights included equal inheritance, custody rights, and the opportunity to occupy political positions. During the 1970’s and 1980’s, efforts to eradicate illiteracy among women were profound, ultimately leading to a considerable decrease in the literacy gap between men and women. In 1980, one year after Saddam Hussein came into power, women were given the right to vote and hold government office.

The eight-year Iran-Iraq War that ended in 1988 marked the initial decline in the status of Iraqi women. Saddam began to distance himself from traditional Arab socialism and move closer to orthodox interpretations of Islam in the region, resulting in less tolerance for female
autonomy in the public realm (Brown and Romano 51). Because of the state of affairs in Iraq, the public opinion of Hussein among Iraqis and other Arabs began to decline.

The status of women began to deteriorate more rapidly following the First Gulf War of 1990. In an effort to regain control and support from neighboring Islamic states (primarily Saudi Arabia) and traditional Muslim men within Iraq, Hussein instated laws that severely hindered the status of women in Iraq. Such laws included legalizing polygamy, exempting men who engaged in honor killing from punishment, and reducing the rights of women regarding divorce, custody, and inheritance.

This was a strategic move by Saddam because it restored a sense of authority to Iraqi men for whom power and control over women was highly regarded. While many freedoms and rights were given to women during times of relative security and prosperity, Hussein “perceived a kind of traditionalist patriarchal pressure from a threatened male population within Iraq”( Brown and Romano 55) during times of war and thus renounced many of the rights of women, ultimately leading to a decline in women’s quality of life.

The Iraq War of 2003 brought new challenges to Iraqi women. Initially, the war brought hope to women, such as the UN Security Council Resolution 1483 that sought to establish a “rule of law that affords equal rights and justice to all Iraqi citizens without regard to ethnicity, religion, or gender” (United Nations Security Council Resolution 1483, 2003). Such laws were based on a law system that was not in line with the cultural traditions and mindset of Iraqi society. Furthermore, these strategies paid insignificant attention to the basic feelings of inferiority and helplessness of Iraqi women and failed to promote gender equality and reduce gender discrimination. The removal of Saddam’s regime brought hope for greater freedoms and less discrimination against women. Unfortunately, this was not the main priority for the U.S.,
whose primary goal was to reconstruct and stabilize Iraq militarily and economically (Brown and Romano 60).

The current status of Iraqi women has not improved. Women are participating less in the growing conservative society in Iraq, and are fading into the background (Al-Ali 30). They are excluded from the reconstruction of Iraq and efforts to reduce the gender gap have decreased. Creating a new Iraqi nation and society is a daunting task, and one in which women need to be allowed to be active participants.
RECONCEPTUALIZATION BEFORE PRODUCTION

Being a student of documentary has taught me that all stories are about two things: characters and conflict. Since the “War on Terror”, many Iraqis have been driven from their homes as a result of the war and sectarian bloodshed. More than two million have become exiles, living desperate lives across the border in neighboring countries, such as Syria.

The refugee crisis is one of the biggest, but at the same time it is one of the most invisible. Seemingly, nobody wants to admit the problem exists. As a result of my early awareness of this, I felt the burning sense of obligation to tell this story through the medium of documentary. As I began my research on the issue I came across an article by Katherine Zoepf, an author for the New York Times. Her article, titled “Desperate Iraqi Refugees Turn to Sex Trade in Syria,” legitimized the idea I had to document the story of Iraqi refugees in my home country. (Zopef 1)

I didn’t know where to start or what the proper way to approach such a sensitive subject. I turned to Dr. Nada Shabout, an associate professor of art history and an expert on of modern Iraqi heritage for her patronage. Dr. Shabout agreed to serve on my Master’s thesis committee as I expressed my interest in investigating issues surrounding childhood prostitution among Iraqi refugees in Damascus. After conversing with her, Dr. Shabout immediately put me in touch with many activists and scholars for further assistance, one of which included Sundus Abdul Hadi, an Iraqi-Canadian painter in Montreal. During our conversation, Sundus shared her research findings:

Implemented the research through the internet, from cell-phone videos of Gulf men recording their trysts with young Iraqi girls posted on YouTube, to conversations with male relatives and friends who, by virtue of being men, were exposed to the underworld of prostitution of Iraqi girls/women in Syria, Dubai and Jordan. Although I did visit Syria, I found no one who was willing to take me to the "clubs," and being a young Iraqi woman myself was also jeopardizing- if not suggestive.
Sundus introduced me to *Inanna in Damascus*. This was a painting of her own about the prostitution of an Iraqi girl in Syria. A naked young Iraqi girl surrounded by both civilian men and soldiers.

![Image of Inanna in Damascus](image)

*Figure 2. Inanna in Damascus* (painting), by Sundus Abdul Hadi.

The more I researched into the subject the more I realized how much of a forbidden topic this was. My interest in documenting this obvious problem surfaced many questions. How would I get in touch with sex workers? What is at stake in this documentary? How dangerous is it to expose young girls on camera? How would the Syrian authorities and human rights organizations react to my investigation of this issue? Who is protecting this seemingly underground world of depravity?

I finally accepted the fact that this idea would be far too difficult and dangerous to pursue. In turn, I shifted by focus but I maintained an interest in the refugee crisis.
In 2008, I came across a fundraiser at a local mosque in Dallas that was collecting donations for Iraqi refugees in America that were in a state of despair and poverty following the inevitable termination of the government assistance program. In my opinion, the short assistance period just wasn’t enough for these refugees to become stable and sufficiently progress in the United States. I decided to do some further research and was shocked to find that this problem was not confined to just Dallas, but was an ongoing nationwide crisis.

This idea was the spark that ignited Rehlet Iraqi. The effectiveness of U.S. government funded refugee programs is the main issue that is explored. Though challenging, I knew this would be an important issue for Americans as well as international audiences.
INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRODUCTION

Theories and Rationales

*Rehlet Iraqi* is an exploration of the effects of the Iraq War as experienced by a family of Iraqi refugees. Through a combination of observational, and poetic personal portraiture, the viewer will be more effectively impacted by the hardships and struggles endured by the family of displaced Iraqi’s in their journey across the world.

Through use of purely observational methods, the Ahmed family’s story unfolds naturally in front of the lens. Looking into the lives of the Ahmed family, the viewer catches an enlightening glimpse of the unknown and misunderstood challenges faced by refugees. As a result, the viewer will be better able to empathize and understand the gravity of being a refugee.

Nichols explains in *The Voice of Documentary*:

> Observational documentary appears to leave the driving to us. No one tells about the sights we pass or what they mean. Even those obvious marks of documentary textuality…function paradoxically. Their presence testifies to an apparently more basic absence: such films sacrifice conventional, polished artistic expression in order to bring back, as best they can, the actual texture of history in the making (21).

> My objective was to minimize narrative influence while maximizing communication to the viewer with image alone. Through use of poetic portraiture, the viewer is better able to connect to the personalities on screen at an emotional level. As the story unravels on its own the dynamic struggle for survival is seen in the small and subtle details of real life. As the viewer is gently pulled into the Ahmed family’s story, traditional Iraqi music combined with a lyrical filming style fully immerses the viewer into their world allowing for a deeper and more meaningful experience.

> Just like the observational mode, the poetic mode camouflages, “the presence and shaping influence of the filmmaker.” The documentary thus takes shape “with the realization
that filmmakers need not disguise their close relationship with their subjects by telling stories or observing events that seemed to occur as if they were not there” (100). Although the poetic mode has many facets, “they all emphasize the ways in which the filmmaker’s voice gives fragments of the historical world [i.e. the real world] a formal, aesthetic integrity peculiar to the film itself” (105).

The combination of observational and poetic portraiture provides the double edged sword that slices to the heart of the viewer. Not only do these methods effectively communicate the plight of the family, but also eliminate the culture barrier as the viewer relates to the personal details of the lives of the characters.

Reenactment and Authenticity

Rehlet Iraqi strives to be a documentary that is informative, truthful, and realistic in its portrayal of immigration and, in doing so, encounters a set of challenges. When it was decided to utilize re-enactments and staging in Rehlet Iraqi, it had to be taken into consideration whether the reenactment in the film would be based on subjective accounts or objective reality. Ultimately, the use of re-enactments and staging in the film captured the essence of the Iraqi family’s daily life, while still remaining accurate, authentic, and reflective.

As opposed to observation, it is possible to get a glimpse of truth by staging an event, or by setting a situation up to encourage specific reactions. The filmmaker avoids falling into fiction by allowing the characters to react and speak freely without interference. According to Errol Morris, a documentary filmmaker, “Some re-enactments serve the truth, others subvert it. There is no mode of expression, no technique of production that will instantly produce the truth or falsehood” (8).
When dealing with re-enactment and staging in documentary filmmaking, authenticity should be the primary focus. How the filmmaker chooses to use the re-enactments and staging in the context of the documentary is integral to the success of the film. It is important to understand that it’s purpose is to inform the audience with factual information and reveal the truth. Morris describes his use of re-enactments as a way to “burrow underneath the surface of reality in an attempt to uncover some hidden truth. The re-enactments of Rehlet Iraqi focus on a “specific detail or object that helps us look beyond the surface of images to something hidden, something deeper – something that captures what really happened” (8).

There is no such thing as a completely truthful or “veritas” lens – no lens that provides an absolutely true picture of events. “There is *cinema verite* and *kino Pravda* but no cinematic truth.” (8) In other words, it is unlikely that a film can capture one-hundred percent truth because the presence of a camera modifies behavior. According to Barbash and Taylor’s *Documentary Styles*, one cannot accurately describe a documentary as being one hundred percent non-fiction, unscripted, or even untainted. Even the earliest forms of films question the relationship between the camera and what it records. “Once people recognized a camera for what it was, they began to wonder how they should react to it” (16).

When Muna, the second oldest daughter, was admitted to a mental health hospital after a failed suicide attempt, I had a mixture of feelings. Should I feel obliged to capture my subject in a major turning point in the story or should I put down the camera and console the Ahmed family? The relationship between the filmmaker-character, as well as the filmmaker and the film’s message, are two more challenging and ethical issues. “In most cases, filmmakers live for many months with the people they are filming. They learn about their subjects and created episodes meant to capture the essence of the situations and personalities” (Rosenthal and Corner
My ethical standards were challenged leaving me frustrated. These ethical concerns left me with a lack of clarity, direction and a feeling of helplessness. I felt obligated to protect my vulnerable subject so I didn’t film that incident when it took place. I returned to Professor Melinda Levin, the chair of my thesis, for answers. She explained the difference between the traditional and non-traditional approach to documentary filmmaking. The traditional approach tend to have a journalistic style with the goal of unbiased truth and the non-traditional, modern, approach entail creative elements such as animations, music, voiceover, and reenactment scenes to help tell the story in an compelling way. Professor Levin went on to explain that documentary filmmaking is supposed to stimulate discussion about its subject matter, not the documentary itself.

As a filmmaker I felt the tremendous gravity of this event. Since I chose to not film this event, I decided to obtain access to a local hospital in Flower Mound, Texas for re-enactment of this scene. I felt that this event brought to the surface the inner struggles that Iraqis struggle with.

*Rehlet Iraqi* subscribes to the school of thought that documentaries speak the truth when they strive to capture the legitimate, the true, and the factual aspect of the situation at hand. “Documentaries are best at evoking feeling and raising questions, and worst at listing facts and answering questions” (Rosenthal and Corner, 162).

Labeling a film that contains re-enactments a documentary opens it up to criticism on its legitimacy. Many of today’s filmmakers are heavily opposed to manipulating reality in anyway. However, documentarians from the past did not consider this “manipulative” (Rosenthal and Corner, 401).

One must take into consideration how the filmmaker chooses to use re-enactment. Morris states “if someone presents a scene as a real event, and it has been produced after the fact,
it’s a re-enactment that’s a deceptive practice” (7). Its sole purpose is to allow the audience to see things that they wouldn’t have seen when it happened the first time. By showing a character’s amplified attitude, the viewers are made more aware of its intent in the film, providing more support for the film’s overall message.

Wissel explains the “Many actualities involved reconstructions…yet not necessarily with the intent to deceive; as a subgenre, dramatic reenactments of current events can be considered legitimate.” Deceptive re-enactment intentionally presents a distorted version of the truth. Re-enactment done appropriately is when it is used with the intention of provoking the truth.

A film that uses re-enactments and presents itself as a tool of persuasion is thought of as manipulative and is obvious in most cases. On the contrary, a film that does not present itself as a tool of persuasion, but as a neutral objective observer and that contains re-enactments makes a case for itself as being legitimately authentic. The audience is more equipped with the latter to form their own conclusion. According to Stella Bruzzi in *The Performative Documentary*, “Within such a realist aesthetic, the role of performance is, paradoxically, to draw the audience into the reality of the situation being dramatized, to authenticate the fictionalization. In contrast to this, the performative documentary uses performance within a non-fiction context to draw attention to the impossibilities of authentic documentary representation” (184).

A part of the reason for the existence of *Rehlet Iraqi* is that I am Middle Eastern and have overwhelming concern for that part of the world. There is risk of being considered biased when a topic is of a personal nature but one must understand that the idea for film is birthed from the heart of the filmmaker. Coming from a country that was affected by the war in 2003 created a deeply personal interest in me about the topic. In addition, the tools such as the language and access gave me an overwhelming greenlit motivation to continue forward with this film. As a
result, *Rehlet Iraqi* is a direct reflection of my own standards and beliefs toward war, religion and gender. By choosing these characters, one would assume the film to present a one sided view, but it becomes evident by the characters interactions, that they are not being censored but allowed to express their opinions at will.

When used truthfully and with validity, re-enactments can serve as simply a replacement of a scene that was not able to be captured at the exact moment it occurred. Whether one chooses to classify this as acceptable to documentary standards should be judged in the context of the given film. Through truthful reenactment, the story can be tighter and the message more concise. In certain situations, reenactments are necessary, and when done truthfully and with validity, reenactments can have the same effects on the audience had the scene been recorded when it actually occurred.
PRODUCTION

Overview

Rehlet Iraqi’s production was divided up into two main stages. The first stage took place in Jaramanah, Syria during the summer of 2009. Preproduction at this stage was very difficult since I had no idea where to begin. I went to several humanitarian group and asked many organizations that dealt with refugees from Iraq. I was searching for a family that was accepted into the resettlement program in the US. I wanted to explore the impact of this experience on a personal level with a family.

A filming permit from the minister of information to shoot my documentary had to be obtained. Its duration was for 10 days only. I had it renewed three times and it was never an easy task. I was informed on the third time that it would be my last authorized government permission. The shoot in Syria occurred between the months of July and August of 2009.

The second stage took place in Grand Rapids, MI and was divided into two phases. The first phase was in April 2010 when the family arrived at their new home in Michigan. I accompanied them for one week. The second phase took place after six months in between October and November of 2010. I stayed for 10 days. On my second trip to Grand Rapids I stayed with the family and was able to spend time with the main subjects capturing their day-to-day life in their new surroundings.

Crew

Fadi Wahbeh: Director, Cinematographer and Editor

I was born in Damascus, Syria. I completed my bachelor’s degree in radio, television, and film at the University of North Texas and am currently finishing my master of fine arts in documentary and documentary production at University of North Texas.
I have had an extensive real world projects where he gained invaluable experience, and produced, directed, edited, and shot both documentary and narrative films in the United States and abroad, including Dubai, Qatar, Lebanon and Syria.

Daryn Williams: Second Camera

Daryn Williams holds an associate of arts degree and associate of applied science in media communication from Tarrant County Junior College. He received his bachelor degree in electronic media from Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina. Daryn is working on his MFA in documentary filmmaking at UNT.

Ashley Beane: Associate Producer

A native Texan, Ashley Beane was born in McAllen Texas. In 2008, Ms. Beane completed her studies at University of North Texas, receiving a Bachelor of arts in radio, television and film. Ashley has produced and edited various projects for tv and film.

David Hamilton: Animation and Graphics

David is a filmmaker from Texas who has worked as a director, director of photography and editor on multiple projects in Syria, Italy, France and South America. His ability to create graphics to tell a story make him integral to this documentary project. He currently works in DFW area as a freelance filmmaker and videographer. Mr. Hamilton graduated from the University of North Texas in 2010- magna cum laude.
Equipment

The Panasonic HPX-500 served as the primary camera in *Rehlet Iraqi*. The HPX-500 uses solid-state memory cards that record video and audio data in a single digital file providing a seamless workflow and also saved valuable time in such a sensitive situation such as this. It is a shoulder mounted high-definition camcorder, which enabled me to be portable. I found this feature to be very useful shooting *Cinéma vérité* style in a variety of situations overseas and in the states.

The Panasonic HPX-500 can record in high definition and standard definition in variable formats. 720/24 Native was chosen as a recording format for the purpose of absorbing the viewer into a more film-like experience. It is equipped with the Canon k13*6B KRS lens, a wide-angle lens with a focal length between 6-78mm of range and 13X zoom ratio. It is hard to predict lighting needs overseas and this lens adapts well to low light.

Anticipating the consistently unreliable electricity in Syria during the summertime, I relied mostly on natural lighting. Understanding the capability of the lens benefited me tremendously throughout the shoot.

Upon the completion of my shoot, the footage was transferred from the P2 memory cards over to a 2TB Western Digital external hard drive via fire wire connection using a MacBook Pro.

Audio

Audio was captured using Sennheiser's wireless lavalieres and shotgun microphones. Dr. Sam Sauls, an audio production expert and member of my thesis committee, advised me to record two or more independent audio channels at all times. I made sure during production to
designate channel one to the Sennheiser wireless mic for my sit-down interviews with the shotgun mic assigned to channel two for the surrounding and ambient sound.

The Sennhesiers recorded a clean track while the shotgun mic added “natural” ambient sound. Combining both tracks in postproduction resulted in a quality that recreated the environment as it was.

The Panasonic HVX-200 camera was used in tandem with the HPX-500. The HVX-200 also records on P2 memory cards and uses the same workflows as the 500 providing the speed and ease necessary in a shoot like this. Both cameras have XLR inputs for audio recording. Both cameras have a compatible format, which allows for seamless editing between the two cameras.

The Canon 7D Camera was utilized for the reenactment scenes. The 7D has the ability to shoot high definition 1080p and 720P video with variable frame rates while at the same time allows for interchangeable lenses and relatively simple workflow. The camera doesn’t allow for single system recording as with the HPX-200 and HVX-200. However, understanding the use of the footage within the context of the final film enable me to shoot this way without problems. Beside the technicalities such as size, maneuverability, and controlled exposure, I wanted a distinguished look and feel. I wanted to have a complete departure from the normal production style. I wanted the viewers to step into the narrative aspect of filmmaking in hopes of full immersion. The 7D combined with the 50mm 1.4 f-stop lens allowed me to achieve my goal. The results were astonishing and engaging.
POST PRODUCTION

Much of a documentary's story is crafted in editing. To me the hardest part is to construct an effective story. I have a hard time showing a cut I think "isn't good enough" to others, especially to those who could really give me a valuable feedback, such as my thesis committee, who I would want to impress. I realize this is a challenging issue for me. The postproduction phase of *Rehlet Iraqi* has taken me longer than expected since the postproduction began in February 2011.

I didn’t have major sequence till end of May 2011. The most challenging aspect of postproduction was construction a rough compelling cut. I had so much material, between the footage, reenactments, still photos, translation and subtitling, I was overwhelmed. At one point I felt that I couldn’t ever cut down my two hour rough cut, and not to mentioned I continued shoot more footage. As an editor, going in one direction means that I failed to pursue another path. The story was always evolving and I wanted to establish the main characters and the keep the story in focus.

Editing is about construction, to me its more than a shot next to another; it has to create a meaning. It’s beyond telling a compassionate story, it’s the need to determine the end first; knowing the end will help guide you along the way and to determine the conflict and resolution. During the post production stage I kept asking myself what did I see on screen I failed to see during production? What is still missing? Which characters emerged as the strongest or weakest? Is it Muna, is it the father, or is it the Mother? Should I start editing in chronological order? For me, starting form the middle was more effective, and was my opening to the documentary, when the family first arrived to United States. I had multiple timelines/sequences in my editing platform, each sequence had a built a different segment. Professor Tania Khalaf was actively
involved in the post-production process. She constantly reviewed my cuts and critiqued my work, I made the changes accordingly, even if that means deleting or adding new scenes.

Editing Techniques

In *Rehlet Iraqi*, the editing style and technique reflects an interaction between three main montage-styles. My main goal is to allow the viewers to focus on what the documentary all about visually. The juxtaposition montage can be applied in different methods to achieve a variety of results. I wanted to introduce the main characters in a natural way, through camera movement, locations and tone. This is why I decided in my opening to show a family arriving to United States without really introducing them, cut back to Syria to show the same family interacting in a different surrounding. The editing technic places a wide importance on the editing decisions to provoke the emotional within a scene. I have combined all different editing styles to highlight the emotional conflict the family is facing. This film has been a challenge to me because of the attachment I developed toward the family, and the fear of not reflecting the right image of their situation. Looking back on this entire process I am pleased to be finally finished with it.
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