

“America Will Educate Me Now”: What Do Iraqi Refugees with Special Immigrant Visas Deserve and Who Decides?

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“AMERICA WILL EDUCATE ME NOW”: WHAT DO IRAQI REFUGEES WITH SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISAS DESERVE AND WHO DECIDES?

JILL KOYAMA

ABSTRACT

Although thousands of Iraqi refugees who worked with the Allied Forces during the Iraq war have been resettled in the United States, little is known about their experiences. In the aggregate, they are a well-educated, multilingual subset of refugees who aspire to earn college and higher education degrees. In this article, I draw from a series of interviews conducted between 2011 and 2018 with 13 of these Iraqi refugees. My aim is to more fully understand and document their college-going experiences in the US. Framed by notions of deservingness and coloniality in education, this study is driven by two questions: In what ways and by whom are Iraqi refugees with Special Immigrant Visas positioned with regard to deservingness and worthiness in higher education? How do they position themselves? I explore how notions and discourses of deservingness, and their practical and political application, affect the resettlement experiences of these Iraqi refugees. The findings indicate that, because of their Special Immigrant Visa designation and their work with the Allied Forces, these refugees are positioned, and position themselves, not only as deserving but sometimes as being owed a college education. The study offers insights into the long-term effects crisis has on the education of those who are far removed, both geographically and temporally, from a crisis-affected area where they once lived.

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INTRODUCTION

As has been well documented by Vine (2019), the United States has been continually fighting or explicitly involved in wars in the Middle East since its 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. These wars, which often bring physical brutality, massive destruction, occupation, and ongoing inhumane sanctions by the US and international governing bodies, are embedded in coloniality. Coloniality refers to the lasting power dynamics that emerged from colonialism and its relative, American imperialism, which is the purposeful extension by the US of its political, economic, and social control. These recent wars have altered the geopolitical landscape and they have affected, if not directly caused, the destruction and distortion of societies and cultures and the displacement of millions of people. In her ethnographic study of Iraqi refugees who resettled in the US, Bonet (2022) draws attention “to the role that the United States played in the displacement of Iraqi refugees who can trace their forced migration directly to the American imperialistic military ventures in their country” (4). In her work, Bonet demonstrates that coloniality and American imperialism shaped not only these refugees’ initial displacement and migration but also their experiences and opportunities once they resettled in the US.

Despite the absence of direct US colonial rule, Iraqi refugees are bound to their colonial history and to the current geopolitical factors through which colonial relationships are retained (Grosfoguel 2004). Under coloniality, “racialisation may operate on grounds other than bodily stigmatisation, adding such factors as immigration and religion,” wherein the immigrant category can be substituted for race (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, 20). Labels like “refugee” become part of the racialized discrimination of the Other, which places those labeled along a continuum of deserved supports and resources, and of who is worthy of what opportunities.

Patel (2015) states that “deservingness fundamentally conveys how the state confers and delimits legitimacy as well as how it asserts its own existence as arbiter of racialized rights” (12). Refugees often are “used as geopolitical strategic tools, and...the international legal definition of refugee privilege[s] some forms of violation and delegitimizes other” (Hamlin 2021, 5). Kisiara (2015) argues that the refugee label pathologizes people by denoting their need and deprivation, whereas Tang (2015) calls attention to “refugee exceptionalism,” which situates refugees in the US as more deserving, because of their need, than African Americans and Latinos, who are treated as the “undeserving poor, ‘domestic minorities’” (14-15). However, these scholars agree that situating refugees discursively in these ways looks past the systemic inequalities, racism, and violence embedded in refugee resettlement.

In this article, I explore how notions and discourses of deservingness, as well as their practical application and political enactment, affect the resettlement experiences of Iraqi refugees who, because they worked with the US or Allied Forces during the Iraq War, were resettled through either the Direct Access Program or the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) process. Like other refugees and immigrants (Bonet 2021; Leo 2021), these Iraqi refugees aspire to be further educated in the United States. As Arar notes (2021), the opportunity to get an education, including a higher education, may even determine which country refugees want to be resettled in. However, only 3 percent of refugees globally are able to access higher education.

The 13 Iraqi refugees who participated in this study are among that 3 percent. I draw from their experiences to explore the ways they are discursively and ideologically positioned as they access and enroll in colleges and universities, and sometimes complete degrees. I examine how and by whom Iraqi refugees with SIVs are positioned in higher education in terms of their deservingness and worthiness, and how they position themselves. The findings demonstrate that the refugees are variably situated variably along a continuum of deserving higher education, based on the complex interactions between their legal status, their visas, their previous education experiences, and their nationalities. I also show that the refugees resist being positioned as unworthy and underprepared, especially by college and university staff members, and instead situate themselves as deserving of college opportunities as part of the debt the US owes to those who served its military during the war.

This paper broadly contributes to what is known about education in emergencies (EiE) by expanding understanding of refugee crises and emergencies. This includes the need for relief, assistance, and support in providing adult education for refugees after their resettlement in a third country. The EiE literature tends to focus on the challenges and issues that affect access to education, and on the programs that aim to address them. The findings in that body of literature are centered on outcomes (Burde et al. 2017).

Furthermore, while our attention in the EiE arena has rightly been drawn to the need for university partnerships to provide higher education in refugee camps (Giles 2018), less empirical attention has been paid to the ways refugees experience education in host countries. This is due to the importance of higher education for refugees that is supported by the humanitarian community (Abu-Amscha et al. 2019), and to the power of governments to provide refugees with access to higher education (Al-Mabuk and Alrebh 2018; Skjerven and Chao Jr. 2018). Policies and practices in higher education, such as competitive admissions, English-language proficiency entrance exams, and a disregard for credits and degrees from other countries, reify what scholars (Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2000) refer to as the coloniality matrix of power—the ways that colonial power structures and systems of oppression endure in societies after colonization, thus reproducing normalized institutionalized forms of subjugation and oppression. In this paper, I use the framing of coloniality and deservingness to highlight the experiences of

an understudied subset of refugees and to document the effects a protracted emergency—the US war in Iraq—has had on broader considerations of what the US owes to those it has displaced and those who served the US military.

THE IRAQ WAR

The Iraq War, which Bonet (2022) refers to as the ongoing war on terror, was initiated during the G. W. Bush administration, which “tied Saddam Hussein—and by proxy Iraqis in general—with Osama bin Laden and the global ‘axis of evil’” (4). The Iraq War was waged as part of a post-9/11 strategy that, as Vine (2019) points out, dramatically increased the US military presence across the entire Middle East in the form of bases and troops. Begun with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iraq War expanded to include the ongoing fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, often known as ISIS. This war has resulted in immeasurable devastation, destruction, and death.¹ It initially caused 6 million Iraqis to flee from areas of intense fighting (IOM 2018), and an estimated 9.2 million Iraqis eventually became internally displaced or were labeled as refugees. Many who left Iraq at that time still live in the neighboring countries of Syria and Jordan in protracted displacement. By 2023, five million internally displaced Iraqi refugees had returned to live in Iraq, most of them in substandard living conditions, and some are still living in isolated resettlement camps or private shelters where they have no access to formal higher education or self-sustaining employment (Zeus 2011).²

Between 2006, when the US made a formal commitment to assist Iraqi refugees, and 2018, the last year of my study, 160,771 Iraqi refugees were resettled in the US (RPC 2018).³ The majority of these refugees had entered the US through the standard Refugee Admissions Program. However, 18,130 Iraqi refugees had been issued SIVs under the Special Immigrant Visas for Iraqi and Afghan Translators/Interpreters program, and 47,331 entered through the Direct Access Program that was established by Congress to assist Iraqis and Afghans who were previously employed by or on behalf of the US government during the Iraq and Afghan wars (Christoff 2010; Jakes 2019; RPC 2017, 2018; US Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs 2016a, 2016b). In New York, the study context, 4,819 Iraqi refugees have been resettled; of these, 454 were admitted with SIVs (RPC 2018). Santana (2023) writes that “thousands of Iraqis, many of whom risked their lives by working closely with Americans during the war and its aftermath, [are still] trying to enter the US.” Delays in admitting these Iraqis have been caused by COVID-related backups, an electronic hack of the immigration system, and the substantial reduction in the number of refugees admitted to the US, due to an anti-Muslim executive order issued during the Trump administration.

1 See Bonet (2022) for a critical and nuanced examination of the effects of the US invasion of Iraq.

2 The data is from <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/iraq/>, last accessed September 22, 2024.

3 In 2016, Muslim refugees, including those from Iraq, accounted for nearly half of the 85,000 refugees who entered the United States (Connor 2016). President Trump’s Executive Order 13769, “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” went into effect in January 2017.

ADULT IRAQI REFUGEES

Many adult Iraqi refugees suffer from emotional and physical trauma, injury, and illness, and have difficulty finding employment (Kira et al. 2007). Most are struggling economically.⁴ However, Iraqi refugees are not a homogenous group, and there is evidence that the psychological distress experienced by Iraqis varies by ethnicity and religion. For instance, Muslim Iraqi refugees resettled in the US may experience more distress than Christian refugees, due to the different stressors they deal with in Iraq and the US, and their individual resilience (Arfken et al. 2018, 4).⁵ In its 2012 annual report to Congress, the Office of Refugee Resettlement reported that 22.6 percent of Iraqi adult refugees in the US were unemployed, 58 percent were receiving some form of cash assistance, and 82 percent were receiving formal food assistance. Sixty percent were on Medicaid or Refugee Medical Assistance, and 36 percent were getting Supplemental Security Income. Similar data focused exclusively on adult Iraqi refugees with SIVs is not available, but we do know that these Iraqi refugees tend to have a high level of education and speak multiple languages, often including English (Christoff 2010). Once resettled in the US, however, they have been excluded from employment with the federal government, even as interpreters, because they do not hold US citizenship and thus cannot pass the government background investigations. Furthermore, guided by the US Refugee Act of 1980, whose aim is to enable refugees to quickly become economically self-sufficient and to reduce their reliance on government public assistance, resettlement agencies steer refugees, including Iraqis with SIVs, toward low-wage, entry-level positions that have little if any opportunity for advancement (Koyama 2013).

In its 2012-2016 Education Strategy plan, which includes specific considerations for adult refugees who have been affected by the crises in Syria and Iraq, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2012) cited tertiary education as a basic human right. However, provision of postsecondary education for refugees is uneven, in part because, as Morrice (2021) notes in her review of lifelong education for refugees, adult education is sometimes seen as taking resources away from primary education. In addition, access to higher education is not often prioritized by the policies and practices of the associations and agencies associated with refugee resettlement. To comply with the US Refugee Act of 1980, refugee resettlement agencies in the US offer basic adult education, which usually includes a combination of English-language and workforce training classes. These formal adult refugee education programs are often supplemented by ESL courses offered by local religious and community groups, and by education opportunities the refugee communities create for their own (Sinclair 2001).

4 It might be more accurate to follow Hamlin (2021) in using the term “refugee/(im)migrant” in recognition of the interrelated, racialized, and marginalized fates of individuals born outside (or in some cases even inside but perceived as having been born outside) the US who move to the US. It is also an imperfect term for capturing complexity and variability. In this paper, nearly all the cited material uses the term “refugee,” as do I.

5 In Iraq, 95-98 percent of the population is Muslim, 1 percent is Christian.

REFUGEES AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Nearly all the refugees who have completed secondary school aspire to attend college (Stevenson and Willott 2007), but we still have much to learn about their college-going experiences. We do know that, as the number of refugees has increased globally, the demand for higher education for refugees has also risen (Giles 2018; Gladwell et al. 2016). According to Leo (2021), “although highly diverse in their demographic composition, immigrants and refugees overall enroll in college at high rates” (436). However, only 7 percent of refugees have access to higher education globally (UNHCR 2020). This likely reflects the pattern documented by Dryden-Peterson and Giles (2010), wherein refugees’ access to formal education drops dramatically as they move from primary to secondary school. Dryden-Peterson and Giles argue that “the extended nature of displacement and the lack of possibilities for education in exile mean that most refugees miss out on their one chance for school-based learning” (3). Females fare much worse than males, as they have much less access to education prior to, during, and after being forcibly displaced (Dryden-Peterson 2010). These gendered patterns in refugees’ home countries or in refugee camps in adjacent countries begin in the primary grades and continue through college. The multiple reasons for this pattern of declining female participation include cultural, religious, and gendered norms, trauma, and a lack of wellbeing, but, more generally, immigration and education policy can hinder engagement for all refugees.

Arar’s (2021) review of studies on refugees and higher education highlights current understandings of how policy and practices combine to both support and limit refugees’ access to and opportunities in higher education. Arar also reports on the potential challenges faced by refugees who wish to access higher education. He states that, although refugees resettled in the US should have an advantage in accessing higher education, they often do not complete their degrees because their specific needs are not addressed in either federal policy or by the institutions they attend. Arar notes that even refugees who are able to access higher education encounter multiple challenges. The first challenge often is that admissions and higher education policies vary and do not explicitly address the needs of refugees. Luu and Blanco (2021) confirm this as they focus on the discursive power of policy to limit refugees’ postsecondary education experiences. They find that, because there are no specific policies for supporting refugees in higher education, refugees become invisible and fail to receive the resources and supports they need. Refugees’ experiences in this sense are similar to those of other learners who are culturally and linguistically diverse, and those who have been historically marginalized in higher education spaces.

Even attempting to enter higher education can be challenging for refugees. They often are seen as lacking “accredited qualifications that can be used to demonstrate the content and level of any prior learning” (Kanno and Harklau 2012; Zeus 2011, 263), and thus are labeled ineligible. Understandably, due to their forced displacement and resettlement, many refugees have not been able to keep their education records with them. However, even those who do have their education records often find that their previous schooling may not be recognized by the colleges in their country of resettlement. For instance, in their study of education opportunities for refugees in one US city, Perry and Mallozzi (2011) found that, even “when refugees already have a diploma, certification, or prior coursework from their home countries, institutions may not accept these credentials or course credit” (260). Others may be excluded due to admissions criteria that do not consider the assets of diverse learners (Hannah 1999). The refugees in this study encountered both scenarios. Arar (2021) points to other studies, including several by Unangst and colleagues (Unangst 2019; Unangst and Crea 2020), that suggest that changing admissions criteria, adding language supports, and creating support services for refugees could help refugees stay enrolled and be successful in higher education.

Abu-Amsha et al. (2019) point specifically to the costs of higher education, including tuition and associated fees, supplies and books, and lost paid work time. Shakya et al. (2012) found in their research on newcomer Burmese, Sudanese, and Afghan refugees in Canada that the increased family responsibilities refugee youth must take on is also a strong barrier to their attending college. In his study of 32 first-generation immigrant and refugee students attending community college in the US, Leo (2021) found that they also face multiple challenges and barriers.

Acknowledging these barriers, Dryden-Peterson and Giles (2010) state that “access to higher education for refugees is even more limited than at the primary and secondary levels” (4). At the postsecondary level, additional institutional barriers emerge. In a study on refugees’ access to and experience with colleges in Sydney, Australia, Hannah (1999) found no formal models or practices that increased refugee participation in higher education. In fact, she found college and university academic staff members to be culturally unaware and not offering additional supports for refugees. In their study of immigrant and refugee ESL students in a US public university, Kanno and Varghese (2010) demonstrated that, in addition to the challenges of language and limited financial resources, refugee students tended to “self-eliminate” when facing structural constraints, including the requirement that applicants have four years of high school English—a requirement that pertained only to ESL students. Ferde (2010) demonstrated that first-generation refugees in Canada face multiple institutional barriers, including being tracked onto a noncollege track in high school and thus not meeting college eligibility criteria. Streitwieser et al. (2019), who examined a range of interventions aimed at reducing the barriers refugees face in accessing higher education in Europe and North America, identified multiple gaps in the interventions. They argue that more concerted, sustainable, and humanistic efforts are needed to meet the needs of most refugees.

Undergirding the call in the literature for refugees in higher education to have better academic and social supports, flexible admissions criteria, and more affordable tuition is the belief that they should have access to higher education. Like other students from historically excluded and marginalized populations, refugees deserve, and have the right to, a college education. This could be framed as an equity issue, but I use the conceptual resources labeling theory (Zetter 1991, 2007), along with that of deservingness, through a lens of coloniality in education (Patel 2015). I explore how refugees with SIVs are positioned by caseworkers, college staff members, veterans, and other refugees, and by themselves, along a continuum of deservingness in higher education.

Labeling is a designation process used by those in positions of bureaucratic authority and political power. Zetter (1991) demonstrates that the refugee label is inextricably bound to bureaucratic processes, national sovereignty, global politics, regional institutional policies, and a host of symbolic interpretations. Zetter (2007) also argues that, due to “the need to manage globalized [and complex] processes and patterns of migration and forced migration in particular” (172), the refugee label has been transformed by “institutional fractioning” and, as governments become more involved, has become increasingly politicized. Governments use labels as tools of control to dole out rights and resources, and to place duties and responsibilities, such as producing evidence of prior education in home countries, on “others” in socially inequitable and hierarchical contexts, such as the US higher education system.

In her examination of the labels put on border crossers, Hamlin (2021) shows how these labels—and the discourses embedded in, generated by, and surrounding them—create hierarchies of deservingness. Further, as Patel (2015) writes, “in nation/states built on stratification, deservingness acts as a discourse of racialization, narrating across racially minoritized groups to re-instantiate the benefits for the racially majoritized” (11). Among those benefits are access to and control over the production and distribution of knowledge in higher education. In this study, I examine how the positioning of Iraqi refugees who have SIVs affects their negotiation of the processes and policies associated with accessing and participating in higher education, which are firmly embedded in realities that are undergirded by coloniality. I also show how refugees assert their right to education and refuse to be labeled as undeserving, not legitimate, and unworthy.

METHODS: FOLLOWING THE DATA

Between 2011 and 2015, I conducted an ethnography on refugee networks in Wayside, a midsize city in western New York State. A large number of refugees resettled in Wayside because of the town’s relatively cheap housing and need for low-skilled labor. Moreover, at the time of the study, there already was a well-established community of former refugees from Iraq. In Wayside, I interviewed 128 adult refugees, 50 of whom were from Iraq. Through those interviews, I became interested in the experiences

of adult male Iraqi refugees who had served alongside the Allied Forces in the Iraq War, and who had entered the United States on SIVs. It became clear that these men’s experiences in Wayside were unique. In the town, they had connections with Iraq War veterans, military subcontractors, and college admissions counselors and recruiters. By the end of December 2015, I had reinterviewed 28 Iraqi refugees, 13 of whom were resettled with SIVs and 15 who were not. I also had interviewed 14 American-born men who were veterans of the Iraq War, five former employees of military subcontracting companies, and three college admissions counselors. Between 2016 and 2018, in which time Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, multiple executive orders were issued that limited the migration of refugees into the country; those from Muslim-majority countries were considered undeserving of refugee status in the US. I conducted follow-up interviews via Skype with 21 Iraqi refugees—13 with SIVs and 8 with standard visas—who had enrolled in a college, university, or vocational school. In this paper, I rely heavily on the nearly 340 pages of transcripts from the three or four interviews I conducted with each of with the 13 refugees with SIVs. I use the ethnographic data I collected to contextualize the interviews, including interviews with Iraq War veterans, advisors and staff members of resettlement agencies, employers, and other refugees. The data also include documents from individual resettlement agencies and support organizations that work with refugees in New York; global, national, state, and regional refugee and education policies and reports; and digital materials from global refugee associations and veterans’ organizations.

Table 1: Participants’ Education Histories and Enrollments during Study

| | Refugees with SIVs | Refugees with General Visas |
|---|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| Enrolled in Higher Education during Study | 13/27 total | 8/15 total |
| Professional & Technical Program | 3* | 2* |
| Community College | 3* | 5 (2*) |
| University: Undergraduate | 5 (3*) | 1* |
| University: Graduate | 2 | 0 |
| Highest Education Level Prior to Resettlement | | |
| Graduate Degree | 3/13 | 0 |
| Undergraduate Degree | 2/13 | 0 |
| Professional & Technical Certificate | 5/13 | 3/8 |
| High School Equivalent | 3/13 | 5/8 |

Note: * degree earned

I made audio or video recordings of the interviews and then transcribed them. I managed, coded, and analyzed all the data collected using the software program NVivo 8.0 or, later, NVivo 10.0. I did the first-level coding according to an a priori general code list, which was inclusive of codes to denote descriptive identifying information, such as demographic information and the names of documents. It also included codes that reflected the categories used by global refugee agencies across the refugees' spheres of experience—home, education, work, and government. The secondary and tertiary coding of the data centered on the refugees' knowledge and information associated with higher education. I tested the codes and thematic topics on three interviews with two other ethnographers who were not part of my research. I applied fifteen primary codes to three other interview transcripts, with an 83 percent coder agreement.

In 2013, I lived and worked as a university faculty member in Wayside. I led a team of doctoral students who were working on related research projects aimed at documenting the experiences of refugees in or near Wayside. The Iraqi refugees in the study often commented that they spoke to me because, as a faculty member, I could help them get into college. While I sometimes accompanied the Iraqi refugees to their appointments at colleges and universities, I have no evidence that my presence helped them. I do not recall ever telling the refugees that I was a first-generation college graduate and that I often felt I didn't deserve to go to college, but I did tell them that, because of my immigrant family's background, I often felt that I was expected to go to college. Throughout the study, I was a volunteer adult ESL teacher at two of the refugee resettlement organizations, and I served on the board of another community organization that assisted refugees and asylum-seekers. I met some of the Iraqi refugees who participated in my study through these volunteer positions, and they introduced me to others. After I moved away from Wayside, I continued to collaborate with one of the doctoral students and, through 2015, I made several trips annually to Wayside to interview participants. After 2015, my communication with the study participants shifted from in person to Skype, email, and, later, WhatsApp.

Had I remained in Wayside throughout the study, I would have been able to collect additional data and to interact more consistently with the refugees. The study also would have been strengthened if I had extended it beyond one city and into the surrounding region. The study focuses only on male refugees' trajectories to college, but this limitation may not have been avoidable. All the Iraqi refugees in the study identified as male, as did all the military veterans and military subcontractors in the larger ethnographic study. Only two female refugee participants in the ethnography—one from Bhutan and one from the Democratic Republic of the Congo—attended college. These gender disparities result from multiple factors, including gender bias and norms that prevented female refugees from getting an education in their home countries, and the reification of gendered roles through the practices and policy of the resettlement agencies, which funnel adult female refugees into programs centered on sewing, food preparation, and childcare. These patterns should be further studied.

FINDINGS: GOING TO COLLEGE

Going to college in America is dream, big dream...I will get America degree. I will get respect and job, and people see how I am like them...College is my American Dream. I always think this in the war: When war ends, I get to America to go to college. (interview with Marik, August 1, 2015)

When talking about his goals in the US, Marik, who had worked with the Allied Forces, shared his dream of going to college. He was not alone. Nearly all the Iraqi refugees in the study, both those with standard visas and SIVs, said they wanted to attend college. However, this was far from guaranteed; one resettlement advisor even referred to a college degree as “part of the American dream that even most Americans don’t earn” (field note, August 13, 2013). Below I focus on the experiences of Marik and the other 12 refugees with SIVS who attended college or vocational training during the study.

WHO DESERVES TO ATTEND COLLEGE?

The refugees from Iraq were publicly welcomed in Wayside, but prejudice and fears about Iraqi or, more generally, Muslim refugees were voiced by a handful of Wayside residents and one local politician. Between 2016 and 2018, half of the refugees interviewed expressed concerns about anti-Muslim sentiments related to then President Trump’s executive order that essentially banned migrants from Muslim-majority countries from entering the US. This was the first time since the study began that they had shared such concerns. Throughout the study, the refugees were situated in multiple ways in the national public discourse, including as suspicious and dangerous. They were not situated as potential college students or college goers. In fact, some American-born Wayside residents feared that refugees might take “American” jobs if they were able to go to college.

Iraqi refugees with SIVs were eligible, as were other refugees, for resettlement assistance and public benefits that covered basic housing, food, and help accessing services during their first 30-90 days. All adult refugees, including Iraqi refugees with SIVs, had access to free English language courses and job-training programs, and they received individual assistance with finding employment. I found no documents from the federal or state government or from any resettlement agency explicitly stating that refugees with SIVs should be prioritized for college admission; in fact, the resettlement agencies in the study had few formal processes associated with refugees going to college. Guiding an adult refugee toward college was not the resettlement agencies’ primary responsibility or objective.

These agencies' primary responsibility was economic adaptation. Integrating refugees into the labor market is a cornerstone of US resettlement policy, and UNHCR (2009) states that stable employment is one of the essential indicators of successful refugee integration. Research (Anderson 2020; Dustmann et al. 2017) shows that refugees are often situated as addressing domestic worker shortages, even as they are portrayed by some as endangering Americans' jobs. Refugees in the US are quickly recast from people in need of humanitarian intervention to those who have economic utility (Koyama 2024). The goal of getting refugees employed quickly can be understood within a frame of coloniality. Narayan (1995) writes that "inducting the colonized into the economic infrastructures of colonialism was seen as conferring the material benefits of western science, technology and economic progress, the cultural benefits of western education, and the moral benefits of the work ethic" (133-34). Despite the resettlement agencies' push to secure employment for the refugees, the Iraqi participants in this study said they believed they "deserved" more. They wanted to go to college to avoid a long employment in the low-wage service positions the refugee resettlement agencies initially placed them in. Several refugee resettlement agency staff members stated that the refugees should be thankful for any job, thus implying that the low-wage jobs were what the refugees deserved upon resettlement.

Having failed to receive assistance from the resettlement agencies, some refugees with SIVs turned to their relationships with veterans and other military personnel for help in accessing college. In their interactions with the veterans, the refugees portrayed themselves as potential US college students. All 13 refugees with SIVs expressed that they were, of course, deserving of a college education. Ten said specifically that, because they had served with the US during the war, they deserved to attend college in the US more than other refugees, thus placing themselves farther along the deservingness continuum. Like Samah, an Iraqi refugee Bonet (2021) features in her work, the refugees in this study "viewed higher education—a lifelong dream—as a route to career achievement" (162). They saw it as the route to a better life for them and their families. Unlike the refugees in Bonet's work (2021, 2022), however, many of the refugees in this study saw access to higher education as a promised right—one they had earned by working for the Allied Forces, and because the US-led war had destroyed their previous lives in Iraq. Remarkably, 12 of the 13 Iraqi refugees with SIVs stated that they had been "promised" or "guaranteed" future access to US colleges when they agreed to work for the coalition forces in Iraq.

Akram, a refugee, explained:

All the time, I thought about going to college, getting job to make my family...No one knew if he was going to be lived. Many, many died: my neighbors, my friends...children, strangers, Christians like me, Shia...so many...If I make it out, I go to college. I work for the American Army... they give me college. (interview, December 16, 2012)

Although none of the military personnel in the ethnography stated that the refugees had been promised college as part of their work contracts, they agreed that the refugees deserved to attend college. As one veteran put it, the refugees who worked with the Allied Forces are “those who deserve it, those who’ve earned it” (field note, August 1, 2015). To the veterans, the SIV label positioned the refugees who served as more deserving than other refugees who did not. Several veterans suggested that independent contractors had offered some possibility of going to college when recruiting Iraqis to work with the military, but I could not confirm this.

Seven of the refugees interviewed were more explicit about what the US owed them. One of them, Yusuf, explained: “If the US didn’t destroy us, my country, me, my wife, my children would be there living a happy life. I had good job...I have, had no other choice when I knew what was happening...work for the Americans and then follow the American Dream...Follow out the Americans” (interview, January 7, 2015). Others concurred, asserting that they now had no country because of the US and that, because of the destruction of their country, the US owed them at least an education so they could rebuild their lives. Samir gave a more nuanced explanation: “My country gave me a good education. I am educated man. Now my country is America. America will educate me now. It is what they must do” (field notes, March 5, 2013). In Samir’s and Yusuf’s telling, the US owed them an education because they had served alongside the Allied Forces, but they also acknowledged that it was work they did because the US had destroyed their livelihoods in Iraq. Samir believed that, if one serves their country well, the country should provide an education so that they “can be part of the country and better the country.” In his view, it was a two-way commitment: he and the other refugees had committed to the US during the war, and now the US had committed to them by resettling them in America. They argued that the US is responsible for its inhabitants, and the inhabitants are simultaneously responsible for contributing to the country. Samir felt that the refugees needed an advanced education in order to meet their side of this commitment. The Iraqi refugees in the study who had SIVs were in fact set apart and set themselves apart—and in some cases above—other refugees who had not worked with the US military or the Allied Forces because their visa status represented their commitment to the US.

The ranking of deservingness is part and parcel of how coloniality works in stratified societies like the United States. It is not separate from the social, political, and historical context of the Iraq War, or of the realities of resettlement. These realities informed the refugees’ positioning as worthy by veterans, case workers, employers, and community activists. The larger national and international discourses were also reflective of the Wayside context, where refugees often were welcome but in limited (and limiting) ways. The practice of labeling, positioning, interacting, and mobilizing refugees with SIVs as “special” was inextricably bound to the discourse about refugees, about migrants, about Muslims, and about how some refugees in the US deserve more than others.

WHO AND WHAT SUPPORTS COLLEGE ACCESS?

Several groups formed by US veterans of the Iraq and Afghan wars, including the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project, the Allied Freedom Project, and No One Left Behind, have pressured the US government to take more responsibility toward Iraqis who risked their lives, and the lives of their family members, to assist the US military. These groups have argued that the refugees are “comrades” and “brothers” who deserve to live in the US. They have focused primarily on increasing the number of SIVs available for Iraqis and on streamlining the application process, which was scheduled to end in 2013 but continues to the present. The veterans groups also lobbied for, and gained, additional benefits for the refugees. Beginning in 2010, Iraqi refugees with SIVs could apply to receive additional US assistance through public benefits for up to seven years, a dramatic extension of the previous eight-month timeframe. Some veterans have also become directly involved in petitioning for special status for refugees and in assisting them after resettlement.

Throughout the study, veterans, members of the military, friends, and caseworkers helped the Iraqi refugees compile, complete, and submit the documents required for the college admissions process. Refugees with SIVs often added letters of support from veterans, and some produced the contracts they had had with the military. The results varied; four were accepted by their colleges of choice, six were initially rejected but later admitted to different colleges, and three were conditionally admitted to their colleges of choice.

Awad was initially accepted with a one-year probationary period. He challenged the probationary condition, which was removed. Awad explained: “I knew it wasn’t correct because Fahad was admitted with no problem and I have better papers than he does. I have credentials. I’m SIV. He isn’t. I just showed them my SIV and I got it, no probation... I’ve got more than *those others*” (emphasis added, personal communication, August 9, 2015). By using the term “those others,” Awad sets himself apart from Fahad and other Iraqi refugees who have standard visas. His SIV label, which represents his service to the US during the war, makes him more deserving of attending college than Fahad, even though Fahad had graduated from a top university in Iraq, had a higher grade point average, and had retained all his original transcripts. The way Awad positioned himself was embedded in multiple policies, such as the 1980 Refugee Act and programs that construct the variable and ranked paths to resettlement, including the Direct Access Program. Awad had completed 39 credits toward a degree in engineering by 2016, and by 2018 he needed fewer than 10 credits more to graduate. Reflecting on his time in the United States and in college, Awad said, “When I didn’t get in [to college], I was scared. I knew I could do it, but I doubted too... Now, I am almost done and I am working on my citizenship... my wife too... We need that because your *new* president doesn’t like us” (emphasis added, interview, January 16, 2018). Awad pointed out what had become part of the political discourse at that time: that President Trump found Muslim refugees, even

if they served with the US military, suspect and untrustworthy. Discourse within this framing, as Khasanova (2024) argues, often conflates terrorism, migration, and Islam. Awad followed the news closely and placed himself in the interview at some distance to me, a US citizen with a president who is unreliable, if not actually dangerous.

Nayan is another Iraqi refugee with an SIV who was admitted to a community college. However, he did not earn his degree. Nayan was placed in a pre-100-level remedial English class in his first semester, even though he had scored 95/120 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language, the standardized examination colleges use to assess non-native English speakers who enroll in English-speaking universities. Nayan's score was 20 points above the cut score for admissions at the college, but he was told that all international students needed to take at least one of the pre-100-level courses (field notes, August 2, 2012). Nayan was angry and told me that he was not "at risk," a label he had seen written on his college transcripts. Furthermore, he felt that he was "smarter than most of the people in the college" (field notes, August 2, 2012). Nayan's experience reflects how coloniality in education regulates the formation, production, measurement, and distribution of knowledge, which often delegitimizes indigenous and colonized cultures' ways of knowing (Koyama and Turan 2023).

Nayan filed a complaint with the college, but he did not receive a waiver for the pre-100-level course. He attended the course, but when I interviewed him in 2017, he told me that he had become too frustrated with "those low-level classes" and had stopped attending college without earning a degree. He was working as an Uber driver when we last spoke in 2018, and he confided in me that he wanted to take his family to Canada because he feared that the Trump administration would send him back to Iraq. Like Awad, Nayan recognized that much of the ongoing political and public discourse positioned him as not belonging, as someone to be feared. His loyalty and service to the US was now possibly not enough for him to deserve a sense of safety, let alone a college degree. Nayan, who aimed to position himself as deserving, was instead forced to take 100-level courses and he was now being labeled in the political rhetoric as suspicious and potentially dangerous. To him, this seemed to override his SIV status.

CONCLUSION: DESERVINGNESS DEFINED THROUGH PRACTICE, NOT POLICY

Unlike refugees in other studies (Kanno and Harklau 2012), the Iraqi refugees with SIVs did not lack adequate academic preparation or the English skills needed to be admitted to college. However, having an SIV did not appear to substantially change the percentage of Iraqi refugees admitted. During the study, nine of the thirteen refugees with SIVs enrolled in higher education and earned college degrees; five of the eight refugees with standard visas who were enrolled in college also earned degrees. Nevertheless,

refugees who, like Awad, had SIVs had constructed a storyline that positioned them apart from, and often more deserving than, other refugees. This positioning reflected the wording of the Direct Access and SIV programs, wherein Iraqi refugees who aided the US military during the Iraq War were said to be “of special humanitarian concern” and thus worthy of special consideration for admission to the United States. However, the study also demonstrates how, in a changing social and political context such as the one Nayan experienced during the Trump administration, the understanding and enactment of one’s position also changes. Nayan’s changed from finding safety in the US after fleeing Iraq to feeling increasingly unsafe and uncertain.

The control the dominant population had over the variable ways the refugees were positioned and labeled and what they deserved reflects their ability to exercise their power through enduring hierarchical colonial structures and institutions, including politics. It also illuminates the challenges faced by scholars who, like me, work in the EiE field and the related subfields of critical refugee studies and human rights education. How do we interrogate and probe such structures in ways that do not lead solely to discussions of what refugees need and their sense of belonging? I find that these discussions reify paternalistic deficit framings by focusing on what we in the resettlement countries can offer refugees (to make up for what they don’t have) so that they can be integrated successfully into our societies. Interrogating discourse and enactments of deservingness offers an alternative. As Patel (2015) argues, “Rhetoric, policy, and debate about immigration and immigrants are saturated with the trope of deservingness” (11). Looking carefully at the ways deservingness turns the lens back on those who are in a position to wield it and who can, as seen in this study, bring the agency of refugees to the fore.

Refugees can, within certain constraints, position themselves. Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001) remind us that those who are colonized or otherwise positioned as inferior have “the power to question, challenge, and subsequently subvert the oppressive structures of power and privilege” (300). In other words, they can exercise agency. However, agency is “an enactment, not something that someone or something has” (Barad 2007) or something that is distributed across relationships and interactions. As an enactment, agency becomes a matter of “making iterative changes to particular practices through the dynamics of intra-activity,” as opposed to interactivity that presupposes independent entities (Barad 2007). We can consider and account for the complex and multiple ways refugees’ experiences in resettlement countries are filled with intra-actions that, once they are identified and explored, unfold to inform the future policies and practices that will shape their education. Finally, this study reminds us that EiE extends well beyond primary and secondary education, where much attention in the field is understandably placed. It also draws our attention to the reality that responses to the need for education can indeed be made during acute crises and emergencies, but that we also can study and understand EiE to include proactive decisions and policymaking outside of crisis-affected areas.

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