**Article Nine**

**War Families and the Iraq Wars**

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**Abstract**

I argue that it is not just that wars impact people’s lives—it is that people live wars and wars are constituted by people’s living them. In Cynthia Enloe’s terms, “the personal is international and the international is personal,” such that the appropriate focus of war coverage and war scholarship is people’s security rather than national and international security. It is not just that war affects people’s lives, but that it is appropriate to think of war as happening on battlefields and in bedrooms, in command centers and in kitchens, with fighter planes and with soup cans. Using this interpretation of war as everyday experience, this article looks at Iraqi war families—that is, families constituted by and constitutive of the Iraq war(s). It begins with five vignettes that tell some, by necessity, partial, stories of the complexity of families living the war(s). Drawing from those vignettes and aggregated data, the next section explores changing demographic, nutritional, and health dynamics of Iraqi families over the progressive years of war and conflict in Iraq. The article concludes with a contextualization of war families, and a look forward for families in Iraq’s near future.

**Keywords**

Gender; war; families; Iraq

**Introduction**

On the state and international level, events concerning the long war(s) in Iraq have been well-documented in the media across the world, and in numerous books on political science, International Relations (IR), and Security Studies.[[1]](#footnote-1) Many of these discussions tell different histories of when the current conflict in Iraq started: at the end of British colonialism,[[2]](#footnote-2) at the beginning of the reign of Saddam Hussein,[[3]](#footnote-3) during the Iran-Iraq war,[[4]](#footnote-4) during the 1991 conflict most frequently identified as the “First Gulf War,”[[5]](#footnote-5) on September 11, 2001,[[6]](#footnote-6) in 2003 with the US invasion,[[7]](#footnote-7) or at the creation of ISIS.[[8]](#footnote-8) Whatever starting point one delineates for the current conflict, it is clear that the Iraqi state has been involved in violent turmoil for a long time. During that turmoil, scholars and media outlets alike have noted which military is winning battles, which state or states have strategic advantage, which party (or parties) is governing Iraq, the implications of the conflict for neighboring states, and other macro-strategic observations.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Alongside these stories, there have been some “human interest” stories and human rights analyses of how the war(s) affect the people of Iraq.[[10]](#footnote-10) These human interest stories are often framed either explicitly or implicitly as tangential to the war(s) themselves relegating the suffering of people as a side effect of those wars, but not constitutive of the actual wars. In these framings, there are the war(s’) first-order concerns of national and international security, and then a separable sphere of human impacts. Those human impacts are often *desecuritized*[[11]](#footnote-11)—treated as outside of the security arena.

In this article, I argue that it is not just that wars *impact* people’s lives, it is that people live wars and wars are constituted by people’s living them. In Cynthia Enloe’s terms,[[12]](#footnote-12) “the personal is international and the international is personal,” such that the appropriate focus of war coverage and war scholarship is *people’s security* rather than national and international security. It is not just that war affects people’s lives, but that it is appropriate to think of war as happening on battlefields and in bedrooms, in command centers and in kitchens, with fighter planes and with soup cans. Using this interpretation of war as everyday experience, this article looks at Iraqi war families—that is, families constituted by and constitutive of the Iraq war(s). It begins with five vignettes that tell some, by necessity, partial, stories of the complexity of families living the war(s). Drawing from those vignettes and aggregated data, the next section explores changing demographic, nutritional, and health dynamics of Iraqi families over the consecutive years of war and conflict in Iraq. The article concludes with a contextualization of war families, and a look forward concerning families in Iraq’s near future.

**Five War Families**

Looking at the stories of families that have lived wars can be a technique for understanding the familial dynamics of wars and the war dynamics of families.[[13]](#footnote-13) The methodology of this article is inspired by Cynthia Enloe’s *Nimo’s War, Emma’s War: Making Feminist Sense of the Iraq War,* where Enloe studies and extrapolates from the stories of eight women—four American, four Iraqi—living through the war. As Enloe explained: “We can draw new understandings of warfare and wartime by paying close attention to these eight women without turning any one of them into merely the iconic ‘working woman,’ ‘wife,’ ‘widow,’ ‘mother,’ or ‘woman soldier.’”[[14]](#footnote-14) To Enloe, it is crucial to consider each woman as “neither unique nor universal,” trying to understand each woman’s experience and “seeking to tease out from her life the wider implications of those experiences.”[[15]](#footnote-15) While, of course, the stories that newspapers tell could have biases or political interests, or both, the idea behind selecting a random variety of stories is to see different stories and different storytelling perspectives.

This article endeavors to engage in a similar analysis of families during the Iraq wars. Treating each family as neither unique nor universal, it uses the stories in media outlets about Iraqi families to look into the ways by which they are impacted by conflict. It starts with the assumption that there is no universal experience of “the Iraqi family” in any phase or period of the Iraq conflict(s), but that something can be learned about Iraqi families, and about wars, from looking closely at the particularized experiences of some families. This “looking closely,” however, is not borne of interviews with each family, private information, or classified information. Instead, all of the information in this article is found in the public domain. With Enloe, I find this important, because “this means that any attentive person could acquire an understanding of this war that flows from taking seriously” the stories of the families included below.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The families I have chosen to focus on might be criticized as unrepresentative—a criticism that is, by definition, true—no family is fully representative. Some might say that many of these families are not *families* per se—after all, Mohammed Qay Suliaman no longer has a family, and I did not find any source of information where Faruk Mustafa Rasool explicitly discusses his family. Ahmed and Muhammed al-Janabi lost their immediate family, and I was unable to find the names of all of the Azzez children. What I did find about Zainab Salbi’s family suggests a number of fractures. Families, however, are not constituted either by their number of members or by their compliance with traditional expectations of the sort of people who compose them. Instead, families are constituted by the kinship bonds that they evince.[[17]](#footnote-17) In that sense, all four of these families are families. All four of them are also war families.

When I use the phraseology “war families,” I am, in part, making the argument that families are constitutive units of analysis of war, and, in part, making the argument that wars constitute families. In some sense, all families are in some way or another “war families,” given the persistent linkages of nationalism, militarism, war, and conflict in the production of everyday life.[[18]](#footnote-18) I suggest that war impacts family structure and that family structure is weaponized in the making of wars and conflicts. When I say that family structures are “weaponized,” I mean that they are used and manipulated by belligerents in order to further their war goals.

I do so in the “telling” of four war families: Mohammed Qay Suliaman, an Iraqi barber from Mosul who fled to Syria and then Greece after his family was killed by ISIS; Muhammed and Ahmed al-Janabi, Sunni Iraqis from just southwest of Baghdad who lost their parents and sisters to murder at the hands of US military personnel; the Azeez family, formerly wealthy Mandeans from Baghdad; the family of Faruk Mustafa Rasool, a Kurdish businessman who went from fighting in the wars in Iraq to allegedly profiting from them; and the family of Zainab Salbi, who went from being part of Saddam Hussein’s inner circle to living a successful life in the United States. The al-Janabi family is not meant to be a foil for all Sunnis, or the Azeez family an example of all Mandeans, just as the family of Faruk Rasool is not representative of Iraqi Kurds. Instead, the story of each family, and the details filled in from families that are similarly situated, is told to flesh out some of the familial dynamics of war, and some of the war dynamics of families.

*Mohammed Qay Sulaiman*

A recent *Mirror* story tells about the life of an Iraqi man named Mohammed Qay Sulaiman, who was, at the time of the writing of the story, in a refugee camp in Lesbos, Greece.[[19]](#footnote-19) Sulaiman is, in the story, now a family of one. He is described as a twenty-seven-year-old barber from Mosul, in northern Iraq, who lost his family to ISIS when he was away at university. Thornton quotes him as explaining, “I was at university and I came home and found my family all murdered. … My mother, my father, and my sister were executed. My mother had shots in her face and all over her body … they were killed because my uncle had joined the Iraqi army.”[[20]](#footnote-20) When he returned home, Sulaiman explains that he was told by ISIS representatives that they would not hurt him, but nonetheless, he left out of a combination of fear and sadness.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Thornton’s report, however, does not focus on Sulaiman’s journey out of Iraq to the safety of the refugee camp in which he resided at the time of reporting. In fact, the story says very little about how Sulaiman might have reached Lesbos. If Sulaiman’s journey to Greece was like many that are accounted for in news coverage, he crossed the Mediterranean in a dingy or a small boat in seas too rough to sustain such small craft.[[22]](#footnote-22) He was lucky to survive the journey; it is estimated that some 3,000 refugees escaping to Europe from Syria and Iraq in 2015 have drowned when attempting to reach Europe.[[23]](#footnote-23) If his trip was like others’, the threat to his life did not end at the end of his treacherous journey to Lesbos; the life of an Iraqi refugee to Europe is dangerous, in the camp and outside of it.

From all indications, Sulaiman lived at the time of the reporting in a camp with very little food and water, no sewage, overrun by trash, and overcrowded with people. The camp, built for 500 people, held more than 5,000 in early October 2015. An aid worker describes: “Old men lie prone on improvised cardboard beds; women rock colicky babies on their hips.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Journalist Rebecca Greig suggests that “sounds of normal life puncture the malaise that cloaks the camp: children shriek as they’re scrubbed clean by unyielding mothers, and families chatter rambunctiously.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Still, “grief is never far behind” as, in addition to not having “basic needs—food, water, shelter, warmth,” the refugees are dealing with the horrors that caused them to flee and the lack of information that they have about those left behind.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Perhaps that is what causes the twist that Thornton reports in Sulaiman’s story: he would prefer to go back and live among those who killed his family.[[27]](#footnote-27) He explains: “‘Now I want to go back to Iraq because the conditions here are terrible,’” as he speaks to Thornton amid debris from garbage and clashes with riot police. Another refugee describes the camp as a constant source of physical danger: “‘It’s not a camp. It's a disaster. It's a zoo,’ said Sameer, an Iraqi who arrived on a small boat with dozens of others from the Turkish coast three days earlier. ‘There is fighting every day. We can’t protect our people, our women.’”[[28]](#footnote-28) The human danger is compounded by health dangers: “There were no lavatories and the acrid smell of human waste was pervasive.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

If Sulaiman’s experience is like that of other Iraqis in Lesbos or other European points of entry, his prospects for asylum, at least in the short term, are poor; humanitarian aid organizations and state governments alike prioritize Syrians’ cases over Iraqis’.[[30]](#footnote-30) Even if Iraqis’ cases were prioritized, “there is only one tiny office to deal with the thousands of refugees—a battered container unit inside the ferry terminal. Long queues form outside it every day but opening hours are erratic and applications were being processed by just two police officers.” [[31]](#footnote-31)

The tragedy that families of one like Sulaiman, or the fuller families alongside which he is trying to migrate, face in Greece can sometimes overshadow the tragedies that drove them to migrate to begin with, both in their everyday experiences and in news reporting about their conditions. Thornton’s headline—that Sulaiman would prefer to go back to the place where ISIS killed his family—is jarring in part because it describes camp conditions as worse than a place where families are regularly killed, and in part because its description of a family being killed in Iraq seems to have become somewhat commonplace, even during the decade of war before the presence of ISIS, as that organization has come to muster significant power. The brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein was well known for killings: “Mr. Hussein’s … tale of terror … scholars have compared to that of Stalin … figures of a million dead Iraqis, in war and through terror, may not be far from the mark.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

In describing Iraqis watching Saddam Hussein’s execution, Bennett describes: “It is fitting that Saddam Hussein died, as many of his political opponents did, dangling from the end of a rope. … For many who watched it, the execution of Saddam Hussein was a personal vindication. He killed their brothers, uncles, tore apart their families, and ran their beloved country into the ground.”[[33]](#footnote-33) The overthrow of Saddam Hussein, however, did not end or even abate the threats to the average Iraqi family. As the Costs of War Project describes, since 2003, “the violent deaths of Iraqi civilians have occurred through aerial bombing, shelling, gunshots, suicide attacks, and fires started by bombing” and “at least twice as many Iraqi civilians may have died as an indirect result of the war, due to damage to the systems that provide food, health care, and clean drinking water, and, as a result, illness, infectious diseases, and malnutrition that could have otherwise been avoided or treated.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Organizations like ISIS and al Qaeda before it have also threatened families in Iraq. *Al Arabiya* reports, for example, that “five members of an Iraqi family who refused to marry off their daughter to a fighter in the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have been executed by the militant group … mother, father, and three children.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

It is not that ISIS is anti-family. Quite the contrary. The organization has focused a significant amount of attention on constructing an idealized understanding of the family according to the caliphate, and in using recruiting networks to construct families, as well as family networks to recruit.[[36]](#footnote-36) Unlike a number of other insurgent organizations and coup attempts in Iraq’s history, ISIS has an explicit understanding of the role of the family both as a weapon of war and in the building of the post-war state. ISIS recruiters often tell recruits a story about the need for good wives and mothers to rear good families in order to build the sort of society that the organization envisions.[[37]](#footnote-37) ISIS, especially in recruiting women to travel to Iraq or Syria to join the group, frames their goals as state-building post-insurgency. They then suggest that the family has two functions: to serve as a tool of disseminating the influence of the organization over the territory that it wishes to conquer, and to serve as the faithful foundation for the genesis of a post-insurgency Islamic State. In this context, the family is expected to serve an evangelical function, and to endure the hardships of war and conflict for the loftier goal that they see afterwards. This philosophy of familial structure is intricately linked to the organization’s philosophy of state structure. By articulating the message that it needs devout women as the cornerstone of devout families to found the new caliphate, ISIS’ recruiting tactics emphasize the idea that the family is fundamental to the state.

At first, this might seem contradictory with the accusations of ISIS killing families wholesale, such as what happened to Mohammed Qay Sulaiman’s family, but a closer look shows that this is not the case. If the founding of a particular sort of state relies on the construction of a particular sort of family, then the families that do not meet the mold of the expectations of devoutness must be eliminated. This fits in with a long history of tyrants in Iraq who punished families for the supposed or apparent sins of one member of the family, or the family’s city, ethnic group, religion, or political position. It is my suggestion that ISIS, like Saddam Hussein before it, or any number of violent organizations and dictators around the world, kills families that do not conform to expectations as a power play showing the ultimate social control: if the family is fundamental to the existence of the individual, then killing families is the ultimate punishment to individuals; if the family is fundamental to the building of the state, conforming families are to be created, manufactured, and preserved, and non-conforming families are to be eliminated.

Mohammed Qay Sulaiman’s story does not end with the killing of his family, or with the glorification of a particular form of family that is seen as the foundation for ISIS and its caliphate. Instead, it continues as his family of one searches for a home, in the terrible living conditions on Lesbos, in Syria, or even back in Iraq. One phase of his “war family” is not found in the news coverage of his current trauma: what happened to him, and to them, in the decades of conflict before ISIS. Another is the story of the killing of his family and what happens next. A third, yet unwritten, part of the story happens as Sulaiman leaves Lesbos for somewhere—and something—else, still in the midst of fighting in his homeland of northern Iraq. In this yet-unwritten future, Sulaiman shares uncertainty with the estimated half a million refugees from Syria and Iraq who have fled to Europe between early 2014 and the summer of 2015.

*The al-Janabi family*

Unlike Sulaiman, it is hard to know where the al-Janabi family is today. Muhammed and Ahmed al-Janabi survived the 2006 massacre of their family, and were last tracked by the media in 2010 as they testified at the sentencing of one of their family’s killers. The story that captured the media’s attention about this family happened during a different phase of the war, one dominated by the US military presence in Iraq rather than by stories of ISIS. Like the Sulaiman family, we do not have a lot of information about how the al-Janabi family lived before the US invasion, and how they dealt with the many other conflicts in Iraq. We do, however, have an understanding of what happened to the al-Janabi family in 2006, and some of the aftermath from that tragedy. Members of the US military killed Muhammed and Ahmed al-Janabi’s parents and two sisters. As *USA Today* reported:

American soldiers took turns raping a 14-year-old Iraqi girl, and one of them put a bullet through her head after killing her parents and her five-year-old sister. … Barker’s statement made it clear that Green was persistent about wanting to kill some Iraqis and kept bringing up the idea. At some point, they decided to go to the house of Abeer, whom they had seen passing their checkpoint. Barker said the soldiers found the girl and her father outside their home … Green led the father, mother, and younger sister into the bedroom and closed the door, while the teenage girl remained in the living room with the others … Cortez pushed the girl to the floor, lifted her dress, and tore off her underwear … Cortez appeared to rape her, then Barker tried to … suddenly, the group heard gunshots, and Green came out of the bedroom holding an AK-47 rifle and declared: “They’re all dead. I just killed them.” … Green then raped the girl while Cortez held her down. Green picked up the AK-47 and shot the girl once, paused, then shot her several more times.[[38]](#footnote-38)

There has been controversy about whether Green or another member of the US military was the instigator of the attack.[[39]](#footnote-39) Green was generally blamed for it both in the media and in trial, but there were five participants. Green died, hanged in his prison cell, in 2014.[[40]](#footnote-40) He had been sentenced to five consecutive life sentences for the rape and murder of Abeer al-Janabi and members of her family. Green is the only one who spoke extensively to reporters about what happened. In explaining the attacks several years later to the *Mail Foreign Service*, Green references an incident where Iraqis killed his friends months earlier, where “the deaths intensified Green’s feelings towards Iraqis, whom soldiers often called by a derogatory term. ‘There’s not a word that would describe how much I hated these people,’ Green said. ‘I wasn’t thinking these people were humans.’”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Before they were killed, the al-Janabi family “lived in a farmhouse outside the isolated hamlet of Yusufiyah” about 15 miles southwest of Baghdad.[[42]](#footnote-42) Abeer was “a very tall teenager who sometimes breathed with difficulty because of asthma.”[[43]](#footnote-43) She is described as having been “covered head-to-toe when she went out,” which did not include going to school. As Mellor describes, “Abeer’s Sunni parents wanted her to learn, to be ‘free.’ But since the US invasion and the breakout of civil war—it was dangerous for girls to be in school—or anywhere.”[[44]](#footnote-44) The al-Janabi war family structured its activities around trying to keep themselves safe, both from the US military and from other threats around them during the conflict. That strategy proved unsuccessful, not least for Abeer. Keeping her at home did not protect Abeer from the danger of war and conflict, though, either the day she died or before.

Before the day she died, Abeer had experienced leering and harassment from soldiers. Still, Abeer’s father Qassim “certainly did not think that the US occupation soldiers would go any further than harassment, because, he was heard to say, Abeer was so young. Consequently, the family turned down the offer of an empty house further from the checkpoint.”[[45]](#footnote-45) The assumption of the family’s safety turned out to be a fatal mistake. The soldiers who attacked the family hand-picked it, “because it had only one man and one assault weapon.”[[46]](#footnote-46) They killed the family with its own AK-47, discarded it, and went back to their post.

Abeer’s two brothers, Muhammed and Ahmed, “came home from school to find white smoke billowing from their house, blood and brains on the walls … the right side of Qassim’s head had been blown out by a shotgun, and he lay in a thick pool of blood. … The boys stood outside the smoking building, holding hands and crying.”[[47]](#footnote-47)

Mellor notes that “when first arrested, the soldiers did not even know the al-Janabi’s names.”[[48]](#footnote-48) In 2009, both Muhammed and Ahmed testified at the sentencing of Green, trying to make sense of what had happened. Both talked about their father’s innocence and their family’s friendliness to American soldiers. A cousin described the family pre-shootings: “The family was close and dreamed of owning a home, sending the four children to school, and living in peace.”[[49]](#footnote-49) The father worked as a guard in a date and palm orchard, and the mother was “a good cook and a stay-at-home mom who wanted a home and furniture of her own.” Hadeel, the younger sister, “loved a sweet plant that grew in the yard … [and] enjoyed games of hide and seek.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

The surviving boys, now a family of two but with a large extended family, dropped out of school after the killing of their family. The US military gave them $30,000 as compensation for their loss.[[51]](#footnote-51)

While the US military did not make a policy of terrorizing Iraqi families, what happened to the al-Janabi family was also not an isolated event.[[52]](#footnote-52) In Haditha, in 2005, twenty-four unarmed Iraqi civilians were killed by members of the US military.[[53]](#footnote-53) In Ishaqi, in 2006, it is alleged that members of the US military rounded up and deliberately shot eleven Iraqis.[[54]](#footnote-54) Many, many Iraqi civilians were unintentionally killed in the fighting between the US military and the Saddam Hussein regime, and then in the US military’s attempt to set up a stable post-Hussein government in Iraq in the midst of a civil war. Conservative estimates put the death toll at around 165,000.[[55]](#footnote-55) Each of those casualties had a role in a family: a stay-at-home mother, a child, a sibling, a breadwinner, or a grandparent. The fear of being killed as collateral damage to the conflict was present in the minds of many Iraqi families that, like the al-Janabi family, structured their lives around minimizing danger to themselves, their households, and their families.

The number of intentional civilian casualties—those rounded up and murdered, shot for sport, or raped and killed—was significantly fewer, but had a clear impact on the lives of those who were not directly affected. Like Qassim al-Janabi, many families were uneasy about living in close quarters with members of the US military—mostly very young men whom they did not know and could not predict. Green was nineteen years old when he killed the al-Janabi family; many Iraqis lived in fear that the next Green would be right around the corner. After all, tales of US military abuse in the prison system and around towns where there were checkpoints spread like wildfire. Even the families that were able to successfully navigate the combination of actual dangers and the fears that they felt of the unknown spent a lot of time and effort organizing that navigation.

Iraqi war families like the al-Janabi family navigated the US invasion and the fighting around that invasion as the government and governance situation in Iraq changed, sometimes on a daily basis. They navigated what might be right and wrong, what might be safe and dangerous, who could leave the house and who could not, on the basis of the information that they had at the time. Muhammed and Ahmed’s testimony four years after the deaths of their parents and sisters can be read as trying to find their family’s place in the narrative of the war. The survivors talking about their father’s innocence, and willingness to live near US troops, implies that the killing of their family would make more sense to them if it were motivated by a war-related cause: if their father had been a terrorist, or an operative of the Saddam Hussein regime, then they might have understood the senseless killing of the rest of the family as well, as such killings were too commonplace in Iraqi experiences even before the US invasion.

No one implied, though, at any point in the investigation or jurisprudence around the killings of the al-Janabi family members, that they had been motivated in whole or in part by any war-related cause other than a generic hatred of Iraqis. Iraqi war families, whether it was during the US invasion or across a spectrum of other conflicts, often had to learn rules about safety and danger that had little to do with justice, or any sense of order.[[56]](#footnote-56) Still, most of the coverage of the deaths of the al-Janabi family suggests that it was difficult to deal with senseless murder even in a war context, especially when that murder was by an invading force looking to, or claiming to look to, improve the lives of Iraqi families.

*The Azeez Family*

The media picked up the story of the Azeez family in 2010—after the United States invaded Iraq but before ISIS came into existence—in yet another phase of the conflict. And, unlike the stories of Sulaiman’s family or the al-Janabi family, the media coverage of the Azeez family included information about the family from various stages of the conflict. Unlike either the Sulaiman family or the al-Janabi family, the Azeez family did not suffer any casualties either under the Saddam Hussein regime, the US invasion, or the rise of ISIS. Surviving the war(s), though, did not mean that the family did not experience instability and suffering.

The Azeez family is a family of Mandeans, a religious minority in Iraq. While they have never had it easy in Iraq, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there was a community of between 60,000 and 70,000 Mandeans in Iraq.[[57]](#footnote-57) The community collapsed in the midst of the US invasion and the increased religious persecution that they faced during the war and under the chaotic civil conflict in Iraq. It is now estimated that there are only about 10,000 Mandeans in Iraq; the rest have either migrated around the world or been killed in the conflict. Some observers have talked about there being an extinction risk to the religious group and its culture.[[58]](#footnote-58)

The Azeez family is one of many Mandean families that started the 2000s in Iraq and ended them somewhere in the West. Abdul is described as “once a wealthy merchant who owned jewelry stores in Iraq.”[[59]](#footnote-59) He and his family had faced increasing discrimination and harassment in Iraq as the war raged on, including but not limited to Abdul being branded with a hot iron and one of his daughters being abducted for ransom. This harassment caused the Azeez family to go into exile in Jordan and apply for refugee status in the United States. At the time that they applied, Mandean refugees were not frequently recognized as needing asylum in the United States. A 2007 change in US refugee law, however, changed that. Since then, more than 1,000 Mandean refugees like the Azeez family have been given permission to enter the United States.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Faced with very few prospects with the market he had opened in Syria and no option to return to Iraq, the Azeez family—Abdul, his wife, and his four adult children—moved to the United States. At the time Richard Marosi tells his story, Abdul Azeez lived in El Cajon, California in a two-bedroom house with the five other members of his family, struggling to make ends meet with very little prospect for prosperity.[[61]](#footnote-61) When the Azeez family heard that their refugee status had been approved, “the news sounded promising,” but their dreams of economic opportunity, steady employment, freedom from discrimination, and a happier life did not come true with their immigration to the United States.[[62]](#footnote-62)

The problems for the Azeez family started early in their time in the United States. Abdul Azeez “was counting on government support to resettle” but was only given eight months of support.[[63]](#footnote-63) At the end of those eight months, “his three sons scour the streets competing for jobs with Mexican immigrants” and he has come to resort to “selling off jewelry and family heirlooms to pay the rent.”[[64]](#footnote-64) As Marosi reports, “An estimated eighty percent of the refugees are jobless.”[[65]](#footnote-65) While they are jobless, the only support that the Azeez family receives from the government is food stamps, which barely feed the family of six adults.

For the Azeez family, their economic status is a huge change from the six-bedroom house that they owned in Iraq, complete with servants and drivers. They owned a jewelry production factory and four stores, and were among Baghdad’s wealthier families. They vacationed at resorts, and could afford to support extended family. Now they fight for every cent of their rent. Their home in Iraq burned to the ground in one of many attacks on the family. In El Cajon, no one is burning their house down, but they do not have a lot to their names. Marosi notes: “Their modest town house is furnished with donated mattresses, blankets, and secondhand tables.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

People like the Azeez family who left Iraq before the rise of ISIS have had a very different migration experience from people like Sulaiman who left Iraq more recently. First, families that left Iraq when the Azeez family did had the ability to spend time in a relatively peaceful Syria as they found their next move. Second, as a result, many Iraqis like the Azeez family were able to put in asylum applications all around the world, while recent migrants’ hopes are pinned to acceptance in Europe, should they be lucky enough to reach it by sea. Third, migrants who left Iraq earlier were not competing for asylum with migrants from Syria.

At the same time, despite a relatively easier trip *out of* Iraq than many migrants have now, the Azeez family faced many challenges as they arrived at their destination. Abdul Azeez expressed frustration at not being able to provide for his family financially, or to get his wife the health care that she needs. Their family structure has changed, where Abdul is no longer a provider for his children, but reliant on the employment prospects of his adult sons. They no longer coordinate parties for their extended family or neighbors, and Abdul’s wife is no longer the matriarch of her extended family. The family no longer relies on other families for labor, or supports them through wages. The Azeez war family has been harassed, tortured, moved, removed from its community, restructured, and redefined. Its reaction, as told by Marosi, was to question its identity. Abdul characterized his life in the United States as not what he expected, and expressed frustration at losing his leadership ability. His wife characterized their life in the United States as not a normal life at all.

*Faruk Mustafa Rasool*

The three war families that we have looked at so far are war families whose lives and family structures have been affected mostly if not exclusively negatively by the wars in Iraq—including loss of family members, suffering of harassment, the loss of their homes, abuse, the loss of community, relocation, and physical suffering and pain. The story of Faruk Mustafa Rasool’s family is different.[[67]](#footnote-67) This family is *of* the wars in Iraq; that is, the family has lived in the Kurdish region of Iraq throughout the conflicts, including the Iran-Iraq war, the Gulf War, the sanctions regime in the 1990s, the US invasion, and the rise of ISIS.[[68]](#footnote-68) Faruk Mustafa Rasool even was *in* one of the Iraqi wars: he fought for the Kurdish Democratic Movement in Northern Iraq in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[[69]](#footnote-69)

Faruk Mustafa Rasool graduated from Baghdad University in 1964, and went on to work for the Iraqi trading bank for a couple of years before leaving to join the Kurdish Democratic Movement.[[70]](#footnote-70) In the early 1970s, Rasool left politics for business, describing starting a cement block factory, then using the capital from that factory to start a poultry processing unit, further diversifying to trading and importing goods from Turkey.[[71]](#footnote-71) Rasool struck it big, however, when he decided in the late 1990s to figure out how to make a cell phone network in Iraq—a network that became Asiacell, and made him a billionaire.[[72]](#footnote-72) He is now the Chairman of the Board of Faruk Holding, which includes twenty-seven different companies.[[73]](#footnote-73) Newspaper articles and interviews with close friends describe Rasool as apolitical, more interested in business then politics.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Yet Rasool’s successes are intertwined with, and around, politics. Rasool came up with the idea to make a cell phone network in Iraq when he was having open-heart surgery in the United Kingdom in 1998, a surgery he needed to have there because decades of war and conflict had rendered Iraqi hospitals incapable of providing the level of care that he needed.[[75]](#footnote-75) Rasool’s initial foray into the cell phone business required smuggling both phones and network equipment across the Iraqi border in violation of the United Nations sanctions regime on Iraq.[[76]](#footnote-76) Rasool’s businesses have become all the more successful in the post-Saddam era in Iraq, where the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime served to remove one of the largest obstacles to the growth and diversification of Faruk Holding.[[77]](#footnote-77) The decrease in the likelihood of foreign investors to trust the Iraqi government has provided Faruk Holding with opportunities to broaden its horizons, given its history of relative stability. In the last two years, for example, Faruk has opened a four-star hotel, and a hospital with 210 beds.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Rasool seems to be indirectly profiting from the wars in Iraq, but there have also been allegations that he is directly profiting from them. It is widely understood that Faruk’s businesses have been protected by the Kurdish peshmerga, an organization that was once classified, by many states, as a terrorist organization in global politics.[[79]](#footnote-79) Most recently, it has been suggested that Rasool is profiting from ISIS by serving as a middleman for their oil sales.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Whether or not Faruk Holdings is directly supporting or supported by ISIS, the story of the war family around Faruk Mustafa Rasool is very different from the stories of the war families that are dislocated by the wars in Iraq. While Faruk Holdings does often need to adjust its business models, and sometimes industry choices, to adapt to war and conflict, it has so far been successful in making choices of capital investment and industrial production that have thrived in times of war as much as, if not more than, in times of relative calm.

Nonetheless, initially, the story of Faruk Mustafa Rasool appears to be the story of a person who is succeeding in a time of war, and out of place in an article about Iraqi *families.* And, indeed, most of the news coverage of Rasool talks about him as a man, as a CEO, and as an entrepreneur without reference to his family explicitly.[[81]](#footnote-81) The only webpage that I could find that referenced his family by name was a page that talked about his donation to the American University in Iraq where his son Zring had received his MBA.[[82]](#footnote-82) Still, hints of a family can be found in a number of different places. On his personal website, there are six pictures of Rasool.[[83]](#footnote-83) Two of them feature his two sons, Zring and Zino. Doing more research into Rasool’s family reveals that he has a third child, his daughter, Zarya. All three of Rasool’s children work for one or more of the companies in Faruk Holdings.[[84]](#footnote-84) Zring is listed as the deputy CEO of Asiacell,[[85]](#footnote-85) and both Zino and Zarya are listed as employees and board members of several businesses.[[86]](#footnote-86) Looking over the father and children’s Facebook pages shows a family that relates to each other—posting statuses and tagging each other, and engaging in both personal and professional communication.

Nowhere in that correspondence, though, is the mother, or mothers, of Faruk’s children tagged, discussed, or even identified. The guess that such an absence is a holdover from repressive gender roles in traditional Iraq seems unlikely, given that Faruk Holdings has a reputation for being on the cutting edge of employing women,[[87]](#footnote-87) that Rasool himself has come out in favor of gender quotas in business and industry,[[88]](#footnote-88) and that Rasool’s daughter is being treated professionally in the same way as his sons. Rasool could be a widower, or his marriage(s) could have ended. His children’s mother(s) could have been somehow affected by the wars, or their disappearance could have been unrelated to those wars. All of those suggestions, however, are guesses.

Faruk Mustafa Rasool’s family is already unlike most war families that we hear of—it is thriving in the face of the wars, and perhaps even because of them, and any non-traditional structure of the family is at least not explicitly attributed to the war(s). But it is not unique. Human interest stories about what families suffer in war(s) are more frequently picked up by major media outlets than stories about those who quietly take advantage of political and military turmoil. Still, war families like Rasool’s exist as well; families whose war experiences are not all, or even not overall, negative. Some families thrive, and build, in times of war, as families and as corporations.

*Zainab Salbi*

Zainab Salbi was eleven-years-old when her father became Saddam Hussein’s private pilot.[[89]](#footnote-89) She spent a significant amount of her teen and preteen years travelling in Hussein’s social circles, always needing to watch her every move and trying not to watch the terrible things that the dictator did outside of those social situations.[[90]](#footnote-90) Her family had a weekend farmhouse on the presidential grounds, and Hussein would stop by for tea, coffee, or drinks, and invite the family to lavish parties.[[91]](#footnote-91) Salbi describes developing manners as a defense mechanism, and learning early that she was never to criticize Hussein, whom she called “Amo” (uncle).[[92]](#footnote-92) She remembers killings of other members of Hussein’s inner circle, and conscious fear for her family members’ lives, even at a very young age.[[93]](#footnote-93) Salbi’s mother took her out of school when she was nineteen, and sent her to the United States as a part of an arranged marriage to an Iraqi expatriate who abused her.[[94]](#footnote-94) In an angry conversation with her mother years later, Salbi reminded her that she used to make fun of arranged marriages, and scolded her for ruining her life.[[95]](#footnote-95) Her mother revealed to her that the decision to send her away for an arranged marriage was the only alternative that could be found to thwart Hussein’s desire for her. “So Mama hadn’t sent me off to America to live her dream. She had married me off to Fakhri because she was afraid Amo was going to rape me? Me?”[[96]](#footnote-96)

It was 1990 when Salbi went to the United States to marry the husband she had never met. A month later, Iraq invaded Kuwait and the conflict that is now called the “First Gulf War” began. Salbi remembers being trapped in the United States at the time as a result of a travel ban to Iraq, and not knowing whether her family in Iraq was alive or dead through most of the conflict.[[97]](#footnote-97) She remembers returning to Iraq at the height of the sanctions regime where she did not recognize the neighborhood where she had grown up in—seeing only a lack of color, sadness, and the damage of both tyranny and economic destruction.[[98]](#footnote-98)

Zainab Salbi’s initial journey in the United States was very difficult; she describes an involuntary and abusive marriage, poverty, difficulty getting access to education, difficulty travelling, culture shock, and separation from family. From the information publically available about her, it is clear that there are some parts of her life that remained a struggle long after she was out of immediate danger: mixed feelings about Hussein, who both terrorized and bestowed gifts on her family,[[99]](#footnote-99) strained relationships with family over both politics and personal decisions,[[100]](#footnote-100) and difficulty finding a sense of personal identity.[[101]](#footnote-101) Still, Salbi’s story of migration from conflict-ridden Iraq is one that is ultimately a victorious one—both told from her own perspective[[102]](#footnote-102) and by most metrics that could be used to judge success.

Salbi is the founder of a non-profit organization called Women for Women International, which looks to improve women’s lives in conflict zones. It has offices in eight countries and boasts individual involvement with almost half a million women twenty years after its founding.[[103]](#footnote-103) In addition to her humanitarian work, Salbi holds an undergraduate degree from George Mason University and a graduate degree from the London School of Economics. She is the author of three books, including a memoir of her time in Iraq and two books about women’s plight in wartime. She is editor-at-large of “Women in World Media,” a news platform that is hosted at nyt.com in collaboration with the *New York Times.* She has been honored by presidents, and named as influential by more media outlets than can be easily counted. She has given TED talks, been interviewed by Oprah, and hosted her own talk show. In *Time* Magazine, Caroline Kennedy says “most of all, Salbi’s organization gives women a voice.”[[104]](#footnote-104) The TED biography for Salbi suggests that she “has dedicated her life to helping women in war-torn regions rebuild their lives and communities.”[[105]](#footnote-105) Emerging Women describes her as a “humanitarian, entrepreneur, author, film, maker, and media commentator who has dedicated her life to women’s rights and freedom.”[[106]](#footnote-106)

There are certainly success stories for Iraqis and Iraqi families who left Iraq during the conflict that are less publically well known than Salbi’s; people who chose to take care of themselves and their families, or live more quiet lives. Much like Salbi, many people who left Iraq during, and because of, its many conflicts, found what they were looking for abroad and remained outside of Iraq leading relatively fulfilling lives. Some families moved together; others moved individually, or parts of families moved while others did not. For example, Salbi’s mother ultimately came to the United States to live with her, while her father and brothers ultimately remained in Iraq. Families that migrated, like Salbi’s, experienced both hardships and successes, and the balances of each were different for everyone. Salbi’s story and the story of the Azeez family share some common elements—families relatively well off in Iraq whose members left when they felt endangered, meeting challenges when they migrated elsewhere. Yet the stories also diverge on a number of axes: how they left Iraq, their reception outside of Iraq, and whether or not they ultimately found a new home with which they were happy.

**Trends in War(s) and Families**

The war families mentioned above teach us about war, conflict, and families. As Swati Parashar explains, “War does not appear extraordinary for the thousands of people who live inside wars and confront the gory images and the sight of blood and bodies on a daily basis.”[[107]](#footnote-107) As Christine Sylvester explains, war is “something ordinary people observe and suffer physically and emotionally depending on their locations.”[[108]](#footnote-108) In this view, “part of experiencing war … is what happens to people, the choices they have, and the constraints placed on them” but the experience of security cannot be reduced to those *events*.[[109]](#footnote-109) Instead, “war is not something that people can participate in without being affected by it,” “particularly in terms of feeling and sense.”[[110]](#footnote-110)

A survey of the statistics that tell us about the status of families in Iraq cannot provide a complete picture of Iraqi war families for a number of reasons. First, like Mohammad Qay Sulaiman and the Azeez family, many Iraqi war families are now outside of Iraq. Even when their locations could be tracked, the ways in which their lives have changed are often complex and difficult to measure. Second, like Sulaiman’s family and the parents and sisters of Ahmed and Muhammed al-Janabi, many Iraqi war families did not survive, or did not survive intact. Third, individual families contribute to, but cannot be fully represented by, averages. For example, the average household incomes between the families of Faruk Mustafa Rasool and the Ahmed and Muhammed al-Janabi looks very different than the incomes of either family. As such, it is important to pay attention to what happens to particular war families as well as looking at overall trends.

Still, looking at overall trends can also be useful. There are a number of indicators that suggest that between 2005 and 2012, the structure of the Iraqi family improved significantly. Maternal mortality dropped, as did the under-five mortality rate and the overall fertility rate. The child marriage rate is dropping, contraceptive prevalence is rising, and delivery care is becoming more reliable. Those statistics give reason for hope, but do not tell the whole story. Between 3.5 million and 5 million Iraqis have either been internally displaced or driven out of Iraq; the overwhelming majority of those have suffered either loss within the family or disruption of family structure. It is well documented that the war(s) caused negative health effects, including birth defects, cancer, and child malnutrition.

While not a lot of reliable statistics over time exist, the available data suggests that trends of family unsettlement in Iraq are increasing, where “divorce cases have been steadily increasing since 2004” when there were 26,690 divorces in Iraq, to nearly 60,000 in 2011.[[111]](#footnote-111) While those rates were not Iraq’s highest, which was in 1995 at over 100,000, the journalist reporting them expressed concerns that the increase in divorces reflected economic and political problems in response to conflict and post-conflict struggles.[[112]](#footnote-112) However, even the meaning of that statistic is not clear because there are indicators that some of the divorces are caused by turmoil, while others are women who had been forced into marriages and who are now claiming their rights to choice and freedom.[[113]](#footnote-113) While it is difficult to uncover the cause of divorces, or even who is responsible for the deaths of family members and loved ones, it is clear that there are a number of broken households in Iraq that are directly attributable to the conflict.

For example, the Costs of War Project indicates that there are around 86,000 war widows receiving assistance from the Iraqi government as a result of the US invasion and the ensuing conflict, bringing the total number of war widows (including the Gulf War and the Iran-Iraq war) to around 740,000. The demographic trends for families have also fluctuated at different periods across Iraq’s many wars, where indicators of the health of Iraq’s families and the strength of its family structures have been higher in times of relative peace and relative economic prosperity, only to plummet with the return of relative unrest. The experiences of Iraqi families also vary according to their political positions, their religions, and their ethnic groups—where, for example, Iraqi Mandeans have almost disappeared in the decade following the US invasion, and Sunnis have been heavily targeted by ISIS in the last two years, but Salafi families are currently favored by ISIS.

Even families that are doing relatively well at any given time or phase in the Iraq war(s) are living wars—both in the sense that wars have winners and losers, positive and negative effects, and in that even people who are “winners” experience pain, loss, and heartache. For example, like many war families, ISIS war families experience the hardships of conflict economically, personally, and emotionally. For each tweet or Tumblr post celebrating the victory of the traditional family and traditional Islam, there are sad posts about death, deprivation, hardship, and loss that are tied to familial relationships. Many war families, both among those discussed above and more generally, had different fortunes at different times in the war(s), and different fortunes across gender, religion, household position, and politics. War families in the Iraq wars do not have one story; they only share the story that wars are lived by families, which constitute, and are weaponized in, wars.

**Conclusion: War, Family, and Futures**

Iraq’s families are all war families, and Iraq’s war families are constitutive to the ongoing, but ever-changing, wars in Iraq. Most war families’ lives were disrupted, over and over again, by material deprivation, social upheaval, changes of who is in power and their governing style, the loss of family members, the loss of homes, and the loss of communities. These forces add up for war families, meaning that war disrupts not only traditional family structures, but also ad hoc family structures, leaving kinship relations at once fundamental to the preservation of any notion of political community *and* unreliable. In Iraq as elsewhere, unsettled family orders are products and markers of unsettled social and political situations.[[114]](#footnote-114)

With this realization, however, comes the danger of attempts to reverse unsettled family structures in violent ways.[[115]](#footnote-115) As I have written about before, the realization that conflict unsettles family structures has caused some belligerents to look to *resettle* family structures to traditional dynamics in violent ways, under the assumption that the restoration of traditional family structures will bring with it the restoration of the (imagined) peace, order, and virtue of an earlier time.[[116]](#footnote-116) In many ways, this is the mission of ISIS: to “restore” the traditional Iraqi family, to a state in which it never actually existed, to find peace, order, and virtue in their view. In other words, family “disorder is associated with disorder generally and abnormal violence specifically *because* normal accounts of war and conflict [often] rely on stereotypical notions of gender.”[[117]](#footnote-117) Family disorder is often associated with, and related to gender-based upheaval, where “gender disorder, then, suggests the unsettledness contemporary situation with war-fighting.”[[118]](#footnote-118) A desire for things “as they were,” then, becomes overdetermined—where that impulse is associated with peace and order in the country and in the family. That situation “as they were,” though, might either ignore trauma, for example, in cases of wartime rape, or ignore agency developed in the course of changes related to the conflict, for example, repositioning women in traditional and servient roles.[[119]](#footnote-119)

Seeing the shambles of families left in the path of war is important, but looking to restore those families to what they once were or were once imagined to be can be a violent impulse as well. At the same time, it would be a mistake not to pay attention to the strong influence that families have had and continue to have in structuring experiences of war and being structured by them. Those influences are not only or even largely negative or constraining. Instead, families can be a source of comfort, resource, support, and creativity in dealing with the complicated circumstances in conflict-ridden places. Therefore, understanding the complexity of the experiences and constructions of the Iraqi war family should be seen as a path to provide services to, and engage with war families, not to take the war out of the family or the family out of the war.

Looking at all of these Iraqi war families, the one thing that is clear is that decades of conflict in Iraq have taken a huge toll on Iraqi families in a wide variety of ways, and that toll is exacerbated by the massive financial hit of the sanctions regimes and the massive civilian casualties of twenty-first century external military intervention. Iraqi war families do not always remain in Iraq, but neither is Iraq the only location that produces Iraqi war families. There is more than enough responsibility for the constitution of Iraqi families *as* war families to go around; but it is not limited to Iraqi governments and organizations, and foreign governments are not absolved of their share of that responsibility by success stories of refugees in their states.

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