

May 12th, 1:00 PM - 2:30 PM


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Thomas, Seth, "A Minority Within a Minority: A Kurdish Refugee in Portland, Oregon" (2015). *Student Research Symposium*. 7.  
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A Minority Within a Minority:  
A Kurdish Refugee in Portland, Oregon

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a narrative approach to the experience of Kurdish refugees in Portland, Oregon, focusing specifically on the experiences of Nihad Abdul Rahman, a 40 year old Kurdish refugee born and raised in Baghdad. Nihad arrived in Portland on January 18th, 2015, five years after beginning his refugee application process with the International Organization of Migration (personal communication, February 23, 2015). The qualitative nature of this paper is expressed through the indefinite article of the title: "A Kurdish Refugee." Nihad receives refugee assistance from Lutheran Community Services Northwest (LCSN), a non-Profit NGO in Portland, Oregon that is one of the four local agencies contracted by the U.S. government to work with refugee populations. This paper uses theories of cross-cultural adaptation, ethnic group strength, and intercultural dialogue to contextualize the efforts of LCSN to combine services for the two distinct ethnic groups. The article concludes there is a great deal of potential within the Cultural Exchanges hosted by LCSN to make use of all three theories for the benefit of all attendees.

*Keywords:* Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Intercultural Dialogue, Ethnic Group Strength, Kurdish Refugees, Iraq Refugees.

### Research Problematic

Kurds are an ethnic minority with large populations in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran and they are often called the largest ethnic group without a country (Gunter, 2004, p. 106).

While Iraqi Kurdistan is a semi-autonomous region in northern Iraq ruled by the Kurdistan Regional Government, Kurds have faced a tremendous amount of persecution in their Middle Eastern homelands, including systematic exclusion in Turkey and the Kurdish genocide in Iraq in 1988<sup>1</sup>. Given the history of violence between the national Iraqi government and the Kurdish people, this paper seeks to gain an understanding of the experience of Kurdish refugees who are grouped in with the much larger Arab Iraqi refugee population. This is the case at Lutheran Community Services Northwest, where Dr. Baher Butti handles both Arab and Kurdish refugees.

Intercultural communication theories can be observed in action at the "Cultural Exchange" meetings that Baher organizes every other Friday at LCSN. Attendance numbers between 10 and 20, and Nihad is often the only Kurdish attendee. The paper asks if meaningful intercultural dialogue, given the long history of violence between Kurds and Arabs in Iraq, can now take place that both groups are refugees in the same American city. The paper also problematizes the absorption of Kurds under the Arab umbrella through the lens of differing ethnic group strength.

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<sup>1</sup> A thorough discussion of Kurdish history in Iraq and elsewhere is beyond the scope of this essay. For a concise overview of the challenges facing Kurds in Iraq since the late 20th century, see the essays collected under the title "The Kurds in Iraq" included in the *Middle East Policy* from Spring, 2004. They represent the many differing views of the future of the de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq that are just as, if not more, relevant today with the Syrian Civil War and the rise of ISIS.

## Methodology

This essay is by no means a comprehensive study of Kurdish Refugees around the United States, and is more accurately described as a qualitative study or narrative approach. I met individually with Nihad each week, ranging from two hour meetings to four hours of assisting him with applying for a Social Security number. Additionally, I attended three of the Cultural Exchanges.

It is important when conducting any anthropological work for the researcher to “locate” her or himself; this is especially the case when working with a community one is not a member of. I began volunteering with LCSN in January, 2015 with the intention of putting my Arabic studies to use by working with recent Iraqi refugees. It did not occur to me when I began that I might primarily be involved with an individual who describes himself as “Kurdish First, and Iraqi second,” as Nihad does (personal communicty, February 23, 2015). It is impossible to avoid assumptions, but being introduced to Nihad and his brother Suheil on my first day at LCSN made me realize I needed to reexamine many of my assumptions. I have studied Arabic for four years, and have spent about a year of that time studying in Jerusalem, Cairo, and Amman. Nihad speaks almost no English and our conversations have taken place entirely in a mixture of Arabic dialects and Modern Standard Arabic. All quotes of Nihad are my own translations, and any mistakes are mine, as well. Finally, my privileged status as a white male from the country that invaded and occupied Iraq from 2003 to 2011 must

also be noted, as well as the fact that many of the scholarships that have allowed me to study Arabic source their funding primarily from the Department of Defense.

Barbara Robson (1996), writes that recent Kurdish immigrants, given their history, are “wary of laws, regulations, and authority in general... and they may attempt to get around regulations that do not appear to be in their immediate best interests” (p. 14-15). My experiences with Nihad and his relatives, including assisting him with the long process of applying for a Social Security number, did not at all correlate with Robson’s generalization. Nihad and his relatives were also not overly formal with me, as Robson suggests, but were instead quite informal and welcoming whenever I visited Nihad’s apartment. For example, Nihad’s sister-in-law, whom Nihad lives with, did not wear a *hijab* when I was around, but she did put one on when she would leave the house. Robson is likely referring to Kurds not from Baghdad, and it is likely there are cultural as well as linguistic divergences between the groups. Linguistically because Nihad, being native to Baghdad, says he has a noticeable accent when he speaks Kurdish, thus differentiating him from Kurds who were raised in Kurdistan (personal communication, February 23, 2015).

Alison Phipps' piece "'They are bombing now': 'Intercultural Dialogue' in times of conflict" (2014) is an astute critique of depoliticized intercultural dialogue based on her experiences in the Gaza Strip. Intercultural dialogue, according to Phipps, simply maintains the status quo if it does not acknowledge the deep power imbalances that are

often present between the two partners who are meant to participate in an equal exchange. Phipps' posits that effective intercultural dialogue on the European model (ie. France and Germany following World War II) requires a peaceful setting "free from want and need." The Ba'athist regime under Saddam Hussein regularly terrorized the Kurdish population and killed many thousands (Gunter, 2004, p. 107). Can intercultural dialogue be an effective tool in the context of Kurdish and Arab refugees in the United States, a theoretically "neutral" and "peaceful" setting? Is the playing field actually equal in this case?

At Lutheran Community Services, intercultural dialogue is meant to actively take place at the "Cultural Exchanges" that Baher organizes every other Friday. I attended three of these events. At the first one, Baher lectured the dozen Iraqi attendees, plus Nihad and his brother Suheil, on their addresses in Oregon. Many of the attendees expressed confusion about their addresses and how it represented where they lived. For example, the difference between Oregon City and the state of Oregon, and the organization of ZIP codes. The following Cultural Exchange meeting, attended by about 20 recent refugees, included presentations by several individuals. Doha al-Tamimi a 30 year old Iraqi refugee who volunteers at LCSN and arrived in the U.S. only two months before, passed around a "cultural assessment" form with questions such as "What happens if you break your lease?" and "Who do you call in an emergency?" Another volunteer spoke after Doha through an Arabic translator. She began by telling those

present that she “understood” what they were going through because she came to the U.S. as a Vietnamese refugee. She told the attendees about dialing “211” and other services like Habitat for Humanity she encouraged everyone to take advantage of. After her, a 22 year old Iraqi immigrant named Massarra Eiwaz who works at LCSN and moved to the U.S. in 2008, discussed Section 8 Housing (personal communication, February 6, 2015).

These first two Cultural Exchanges are unusual examples of intercultural dialogue between the host community and the Iraqi/Kurdish refugee community because none of the services offered by the host discussed were specific to Iraqi or Kurdish refugees. The cultural identities and histories of those present were not the fulcrum of the meetings, yet they were still present. The fact that no presenters had been born in the United States, and that all but one were Iraqi Arabs, underscored that this intercultural dialogue was really more of an *intra-cultural* dialogue, with the unspoken dominant cultural identity being Iraqi Arab. That Nihad does not actively voice his Kurdish identity at the Cultural Exchange meetings is not so surprising; As Kathleen Wong(Lau) (2002) has written, “ethnic minorities often create a larger, more strategic *political identity* such as ‘Asian American identity.’” The same logic can be applied to Kurdish immigrants to the U.S., such as Nihad’s brother who runs a food truck in downtown Portland called “Babylon Iraqi.” There is an implied economic benefit to



fully adopting the Iraqi political identity, perhaps because Americans are likely more familiar with Iraq than Kurdistan.

The third Cultural Exchange, however, stood out due to the storytelling and resulting intercultural dialogue that took place. Three Master of Social Work students from a local university, all born in the U.S. led the meeting and each attendee told them their story of how they became refugees in America. There were heartbreaking stories of kidnapped children, civil unrest, and sectarian tension. As the attendees told stories of being harassed by Shia militias, Baher would redirect the conversation by asking an Iraqi Arab Shia attendee what their experience had been. Baher eventually asked Nihad, the only Kurd present, why he had not relocated to Kurdistan instead of the U.S., hypothetically. Nihad responded that the Kurds would hear his Baghdad accent and not consider him Kurdish (personal communication, February 21, 2015). Until this point, there had been no explicit acknowledgment during the Cultural Exchanges of any differing cultural identities among the Iraqi and Kurdish refugees.

Young Yun Kim's "Cross-Cultural Adaptation: An Integrative Theory" provides a useful framework for examining the "give and take" of the acculturation process of various migrant communities based on their ethnic group strength and host receptivity. The Iraqi community in Portland is sizable enough to host a branch of the national Iraqi festival called "Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here", named after a well-known street of booksellers in Baghdad. The case is strikingly different for Kurdish immigrants to

America, where the U.S. Census Bureau categorizes the roughly 40,000 Kurds within the “Arab population” (Patricia, 2003). Thus, the ethnic group strength of Kurdish people, when separated from the much larger Iraqi and Arab immigrant populations, is almost non-existent. Indeed, all the Kurds that Nihad knows in Portland are related to him by blood or by marriage. In Germany, where around 800,000 Kurds via Turkey have immigrated, the ethnic group strength is such that “Kurdish nationalism has become integrally tied to guaranteeing Kurdish language education in school, obtaining media privileges in the Kurdish language, and gaining recognition of the Kurds as a distinct ethnocultural community” (Natali, 2014, p. 113). These are not achievements an ethnic group numbering in the thousands can realistically expect to gain in the United States. Therefore, what does cross-cultural adaptation look like for Nihad and his family?

As Kim writes, “adaptation to one’s social environment occurs through communication” (2002). From an outsider’s perspective, Nihad and his family have two primary social environments to adapt to: the larger, English-speaking host culture, and the smaller, Arabic-speaking Iraqi immigrant culture they have been grouped with. Yet, when I asked Nihad what his relationship is with the Iraqi refugees, he said “there is none” (personal communication, February 23, 2015). When asked about the Cultural Exchanges, Nihad clarifies that is his only relationship to the Iraqi community. Despite his native Arabic proficiency and living almost his whole life in Baghdad, Nihad has not adapted yet to either the Iraqi or American community, and currently relies on his

family, some of whom arrived in Portland in 2010. That does not mean he wants to be isolated:

I want relationships with the whole community, if possible Kurds, if possible Arabs, if possible Americans, if possible Yazidi... I mean, I'm pleased with everything except relationships: benign, good friendships (personal communication, February 23, 2015).

Nihad considers language acquisition the most important part of his transition, and he is taking basic English courses once a week at the Immigrant & Refugee Community Organization (IRCO). If Nihad is to have any hope of finding employment, he must learn English, a fact he is soberingly aware of. During our interview, I asked him what kind of job he would like to have, and he simply repeat that he must learn English first; it was as if he wouldn't allow himself to think about what job he *might* want until he learns some English. Here the relative weakness of the Kurdish ethnic group in Portland, Oregon may serve him well because he does not have a large support system to stall his language acquisition. There are other barriers, of course, but the lack of any economic foundation until he learns English is the biggest motivator possible. As a refugee, Nihad is entitled to \$345 a month for only eight months, as well as food stamps (personal communication, February 23, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

Intercultural dialogue, as exhibited by the Cultural Exchange meetings that take place regularly at LCSN, where both Iraqi Kurdish and Arab Iraqi refugees are present, are an

important means of strengthening cultural ties between two distinct ethnic groups from the same region. They can be effective if the contentious history is acknowledged and discussed, as has been the case more extensively between Sunni and Shia Muslim Iraqis at the meetings. This is certainly a difficult process, but the active attendance of more Kurds (even if they are all relatives of Nihad) would promote further dialogue.

What gives the Cultural Exchanges their potential for effective intercultural dialogue between Iraqi Arabs and Iraqi Kurds is that all members involved are refugees and are therefore on a more equal playing field than they would be in Iraq. The group of regular attendees includes PhDs and, like Nihad, people without any university degree. As a result, they have all lost a tremendous amount of social capital, whether it is the fact that one is not able to practice medicine anymore in the United States, or that one cannot speak English. Because of the relative ethnic group strength of the Iraqi Arab refugees compared to the Iraqi Kurdish refugees, efforts should be made by LCSN to also promote the Kurdish identities of the refugee population they assist. Otherwise, there is a risk the second generation will be drastically removed from their parents, linguistically and culturally (Wong(Lau), 2002). The point is not to “normalize” the fraught and violent history between Kurds and Arabs; rather, it is to find the most beneficial situation for both Arabs and Kurds - both, in the end, minorities - coexisting and thriving in a new, American environment.

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