



Iraqi refugee students: Cultural background profiles

Language

Arabic and some Kurdish

Teaching in the Classroom

In Iraq, education is free and compulsory until the age of 12. However, the danger involved in going to and from school has precipitated a decline in attendance. This has resulted in a general decline in school performance marked by the necessity of most children repeating one grade level.

Only about 10% of the total Iraqi refugee youth population is enrolled in school. The UN, Red Crescent, and NGOs such as Save the Children are operating in the region monitoring the situation and have set up care centers with some limited educational opportunities or educational reference services. Students in your classroom are very likely to have experienced interrupted educations and to be several grade levels behind their peers. Girls may well have had less access to education than boys.

Family/School Engagement

Iraqi families value education, and before the war, many Iraqis were highly educated. Parents and older Iraqis may actually have higher literacy rates than teenage Iraqis or young adults.

Iraqi males, often classified as achievement-driven and hard workers, thrive in positions of leadership and value affiliation. Iraqi males are likely to do well as community navigators or as leaders of planning committees within the school. The US created a Special Immigrant Visa (SIVs) for Iraqis who were employed by the US government during the Iraq invasion as translators, so you may find interpreters among your parents.





Most Iraqi women wear a hijab and, although they may be somewhat modern in terms of working and driving in the US, they still generally prefer gender separation. Iraqi women are typically responsible for their children's education and will work hard to ensure their children succeed. Holding ESL classes or other adult education classes with separate genders may increase Iraqi women's participation. It is important to keep in mind that many refugees do not know how to drive or lack access to a car, so transportation to school events will be a challenge.

Teachers working with Muslims should remember that Islam does not depict the Prophet Muhammad. In fact, using images of the Prophet is considered offensive.

Culture, Gender and Family

There are some Iraqi social traits or customs that are helpful to know. Men commonly hold hands or kiss when greeting each other, but this is typically not the case for men and women. Respect is given to the elderly and women, especially those with children.

Hospitality is an Arab and Muslim tradition deeply ingrained in the culture. Visitors must always be fed and looked after. Invitations to a home should be seen as an honor. Iraqis will often work to help others in need.

Almost 80% of Iraqis are Arab, while some 15-20% are Kurds. Kurdish women, unlike those in many other Muslim cultures, do not cover their faces, and men and women participate in mixed-gender activities. Iraqi Christians may follow Iraqi cultural traditions but not religious Muslim traditions.

The contemporary conflict between Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis is based not only on a schism that happened almost 14 centuries ago but on the politics of the Saddam Hussein era. The Sunni Arabs, some 15-20% of the population, provided the bulk of the governing class under Saddam, while the Shiites, upward of 60% of the population, were denied political rights and their religious freedoms were curtailed. The majority of non-Kurdish Muslim Iraqis in the United States are Shiites. There are also a large number of Christians.

Among Muslims, while there is a divide between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, they share many of the same basic values, including not to consume pork or alcohol, to meet on



Fridays at the mosque, and the necessity of fasting, praying, pilgrimage and zakat, or giving to the poor.

Islam is a strictly patriarchal religion such that men are at the head of their family and society generally. Women are expected to be strictly obedient to their husbands. One custom that is at odds with US society is the practice of arranged marriage for girls of a very young age.

Between 1960 and 1980, Iraqi women had gained access to education, healthcare and employment, and their political and economic participation was significantly advanced. But women suffered considerably during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, with many becoming widows and having to support their families, although at the same time, the shortage of men enabled women to enter fields of education and employment that had previously been closed to them. UN sanctions imposed after the first Gulf War (1991) caused further hardship for the Iraqi people, and since the 2003 war, women's position and security in society has markedly deteriorated. As of 2009, though, this appears to be improving.