



## Book Review

**Keyel, Jared.** 2023. *Resettled Iraqi Refugees in the United States: War, Refuge, Belonging, Participation, and Protest*. Berghahn Books. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.2809003>.

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While many factors are driving contemporary migration and refugee crises, conflict remains an important cause. Since the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine in 2022, an estimated 3.7 million people have been internally displaced; approximately 6.3 million have fled to Poland, Hungary, and other countries (USA for UNHCR 2024a). Meanwhile, the war in Syria rages on and has displaced more than one-half of the total population. 6.8 million people are still inside the country, and 5.3 million refugees live in neighboring states (USA for UNHCR 2024b). The magnitude of these disasters and the ongoing crises in Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan, the Sahel, Gaza, and additional conflict zones is difficult to grasp.

How do citizens make sense of the massive scale of displacement across the globe? How are they interacting with refugees who have been resettled in their local communities? Do they respond differently when their own government's foreign policies are responsible for causing refugee and migration crises? *Resettled Iraqi Refugees in the United States: War, Refuge, Belonging, Participation, and Protest* addresses these questions. Keyel's important and timely book sheds light on the more than 172,000 Iraqis who resettled in the US between 2003 and 2017. At the outset, the author states unequivocally that militarism and conflict caused their displacement and implores all Americans to consider our moral responsibilities to the people who were harmed by this militarized violence.

Scholars interested in refugee resettlement, immigrant integration, and citizenship will appreciate the wealth of information that the author provides. Written in accessible language, the book should also appeal to both graduate and advanced undergraduate students. In addition, its findings are relevant to a larger, non-academic audience that includes members of nonprofits, NGOs, and immigrants' rights advocacy organizations. The analysis centers on refugees' participation in American society and political life following their resettlement. The author is especially interested in their efforts to create and enlarge spaces of belonging through interactions with native-born Americans. The main sources of data are interviews that Keyel conducted between September 2017 and February 2018 with 15 subjects residing in different parts of the country. He recruited participants using personal and professional contacts in nonprofits serving immigrants and refugees in the

Chicago metropolitan area, New York City, and Upstate New York. He then employed a snowball method to identify additional informants and, over time, enlarged the geographic scope of the research to Washington, DC, and Virginia.

Many of the study's informants have experienced anti-immigrant sentiments, Islamophobia, and other stigmatizing discourses. These interpersonal and intercultural challenges notwithstanding, they are often agents of change. The author succeeds in capturing refugees' exchanges with friends, colleagues, and neighbors and highlighting their contributions toward building a more open and diverse society. These "intentional and reciprocal social exchanges" with other newcomers and native-born Americans can "create and enlarge spaces" in which to belong (p. 5).

Keyel is also interested in advocacy and activism, which are indispensable for securing rights and recognition. He therefore examines refugees' engagement with the nonprofit sector, volunteer networks, and protest movements. *Resettled Iraqi Refugees in the United States* argues that these (and other) forms of political mobilization can protect and enlarge spaces for belonging. Keyel concludes that "collective action undertaken *together by newcomers and native-born citizens* ... is critical to defending and expanding the rights of refugees and other marginalized groups" (p. 5, emphasis added). By encouraging this type of collective action, the author envisions a cosmopolitan democracy characterized by less rigid delineations between "insiders" and "outsiders." Keyel draws from Carole Pateman's work on democratizing democracy by increasing participation in existing institutions while creating new forms of participation (Pateman 2012). He also builds on Seyla Benhabib's insights that "democracies require porous borders" (Benhabib 2006, p. 68).

The readership of Nonprofit Policy Forum should find Chapter 4 especially relevant. Here Keyel explores several interesting examples of resettled refugees volunteering with nonprofits, participating in other civil society organizations, and engaging in policy advocacy. On occasion, the study's informants have created and led new organizations. To illustrate, one interviewee founded a nonprofit in Western New York that serves Iraqi and Arab immigrants. He is quoted as saying, "I feel I have a responsibility ... to do something for the community" (p. 137). Another individual established a group in Virginia. Volunteers picked up newly arrived refugees at the airport and provided translation services and meals in cooperation with the local resettlement agency. He ended up spearheading other volunteer-based initiatives with the goal of helping refugees become "productive" members of the community (p. 136). Yet another informant discusses her experiences in organizations that offered classes for immigrants preparing for the citizenship exam, learning how to drive, and honing other skills. The refugees' activities are diverse and range from volunteering during festivals designed to celebrate immigrant communities and multiculturalism to organizing a "know your rights" workshop for immigrants.

Chapter 4 also describes actions organized to protest the Trump administration's "travel ban," which targeted predominately Muslim countries.

The book's first-person accounts of volunteering and participating in other forms of community engagement are rich. However, this particular section of the book is fewer than 15 pages. Consequently, the reader is left with several unanswered questions. What lessons might we draw from the informants' experiences concerning the effectiveness of different types of civil society organizations? Which modes of action were more (or less) efficacious in terms of serving and empowering refugee communities? Does this case challenge conventional understandings of civil societal actors that differentiate non-profit "service providers" from more political and/or "activist" organizations? These topics need further development.

The book also misses opportunities to engage in comparative analysis. For example, it is understandable that Chapter 4 focuses on protests denouncing the above-mentioned travel ban. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to hear more about how the resettled refugee community responded to the Trump administration's other extremely punitive policies, including forcible family separations, attempts to block asylum seekers, and other measures. The introductory chapter mentions these policies, but it does so mainly to set the stage for the subsequent analysis. Alternatively, the study might have briefly addressed similarities and differences in refugees' political engagement across different presidential administrations. The multiple sites of research could form the basis of further comparisons: one wonders if the author observed any variation in the types of activities undertaken in the different regions or locales. Moreover, cross-national perspectives are not included; engagement with the robust, global, and interdisciplinary literature on migration studies is thus minimal.

Further discussion of Keyel's own experiences in community organizations would have been a welcome addition to the study. In the first few pages, the author observes, "When I began this research, I had been working in the nonprofit sector for 10 years, primarily with organizations that serve immigrants and refugees to the United States. In many ways, this research project and my interest in understanding the complex experiences of newcomers to the United States grew out of that work" (p. 10). Yet the book is mostly silent on the nature of that work and how it shaped the project. Much of the audience for this book – students, volunteers, members of nonprofits, and immigrants' rights advocates in particular – will want to hear more. Furthermore, academics may expect the study to cite the existing literature on community-engaged research practices and/or explain why the project does not use such an approach.

Despite these shortcomings, the book makes several valuable contributions. Its greatest strength is the foregrounding of refugees' voices. The qualitative and narrative data are fascinating, and the author's analysis is nuanced. The extensive

quotations provide a much-needed glimpse into the subjects' lived experiences and, perhaps more significantly, their own understandings of those experiences. Because the author carefully contextualizes the narrative data, readers learn about the informants' family, professional, and other circumstances in Iraq, subsequent displacement, reasons for seeking protection in the US, and experiences as resettled refugees. The interviews reveal the refugees' thinking on deeper questions of belonging, citizenship, and democracy. Chapters 3 and 4, for example, remind us that opportunities to engage meaningfully in dialogue on issues of importance are essential for democracy. Informants seem eager to express their political views and well versed in their constitutionally protected right to the free speech. One interviewee discusses his varied efforts to teach others about their democratic rights and responsibilities and concludes, "I am very attached to American democracy" (p. 100). Readers will be deeply moved by such sentiments, especially at a moment when seven out of 10 Americans agree with the statement that our democracy is "imperiled" (Bailey and Collins 2023).

*Resettled Iraqi Refugees in the United States* contributes to existing scholarship by emphasizing refugees' agency. The study illuminates the myriad ways in which resettled refugees participate in political life, often in collaboration with other community members. In doing so, it offers a perspective that differs from the extant research on refugees and displacement, which often focuses on human rights violations, trauma, harm, and hardship. The book also invites all Americans to be agents of change: the Conclusion encourages everyone to work with – and support – people who suffer from discrimination, violence, and marginalization. Many of these efforts can and should happen at the local level. The informants have made a difference in their communities; we can, as well.

At the same time, Keyel writes candidly about barriers to democratic participation. Chapter 3 includes a thoughtful discussion of challenges that resettled refugees must overcome. Examples include carving out time for political and civic activities after working long hours and/or multiple jobs, struggling to provide for one's family, and having to be (mostly) self-reliant given the limited availability of welfare programs. In fact, the author astutely observes that these same factors hinder the ability of many Americans to be politically engaged.

Keyel is likewise straightforward about his normative commitments. For instance, at the very beginning he shares that a "lifelong opposition to war" has shaped the project (p. 10). "Marching against the 2003 invasion of Iraq was one of my first political acts. This commitment informs my desire to understand the ways in which American war has harmed so many people in Iraq and beyond" (p. 10). As noted previously, the author clearly identifies militarism, hegemony, and war as the primary causes driving the displacement of the Iraqi people. Refusing to conceal this inescapable reality is a praiseworthy choice.

The author's other normative commitment is to denounce xenophobia and exclusions and to champion a more welcoming and inclusive society, which will deepen democracy. This rallying cry should appeal to many scholars, immigrants' rights advocates, and citizens of our democracy.

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