What to Know About the Afghan, Iraqi, and Syrian Communities

By VIRTIS, INC.
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About VIRTIS, INC.

- **Stands** for Veteran, Immigrant, and Refugee Trauma Institute of Sacramento, and is a none profitable 501C tax exempt organization.

- **Founded** by Dr. Patrick Marius Koga, MD, MPH, FRSPH, Director, Refugee Health Research, Department of Public Health Sciences, UCD in 2009

- VIRTIS is founded, **lead, and managed** by former refugee and immigrants, and is located at 2740 Fulton Avenue, STE 204, Sacramento, CA 95821.

- It serves all refugee and immigrant communities, and has **ethnic based health programs** for Afghan, Arab, African, Iranian, Latino, Russian, and South East Asian communities.
VIRTIS, INC. Goals and Services

- RISE (Research, Instruction, Serve, and Empowerment)
- Research: epidemiological and disparity surveys on trauma, qualitative studies of social psychology of violence, cultural, religious, and spiritual determinants of trauma resilience.
- Instruct: advance and disseminate knowledge of culturally competent PTSD treatments and interventions for refugees, immigrants, and veterans. Practicum site for students and interns of psychology and public health. Health education for communities.
Goals and Services Cont.

- **Serve:** provide clinical counseling and psychosocial services to traumatized individuals and their families. Develop best practices along the population movement continuum by connecting "downstream" systems of care with "upstream" communities in their countries of origin or in UNHCR refugee camps.

- **Empower:** refugees, immigrants, and veterans, their families and communities, through professional and peer guidance, mentoring, advocacy, and partnership.
1. AFGHANISTAN

- Afghanistan is considered Heart of Asia
- Bordered with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and China in the North, with Pakistan in South and East, and with Iran and Turkmenistan in West
Population, Religion, Ethnic Groups, and Language

- **Estimated** 32-Million people
- Islam is the main **religion**. 99% people are Muslims. Small group of Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, and Jews scattered in towns
- **Ethnic groups** are Pashton, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkmen, Nuristani, Balouch, Pashae, and Aymaq
- National **Languages** are Pashto and Dari
- Dari is usually referred as **Farsi** which is different in dialect from Iranian Farsi
History

- Afghanistan due to geopolitical location has always been a conflict zone of other countries.
- Afghanistan has witnessed very turbulent and volatile sociopolitical events in its modern history,
- 1964: King Zahir Shah drafts and implements constitution to move Afghanistan towards democracy with constitutional monarchy
- 1973: Dawood Khan deposes King Zahir Shah in coup to become first President of Afghanistan
- 1978: Soviet Union invades
- 1989-1992: Soviet Union retreats, civil war ensues
- 1996: Taliban took over authority over the nation
- 2001: Operation Enduring Freedom instills Hamid Karzai as interim President, followed by three democratic presidential elections.
Decades of *war* have led Afghanistan to be one of the biggest migratory movements seen by the world.


By 2008, 1 of 4 refugees worldwide was from Afghanistan.

*Majority migrated* to neighboring Pakistan, Iran, India, Central Asia, and Russia.

Considerable groups also migrated to the U.S. and Europe.

Over 30% of Afghans suffer from mental health problems. 73% *women* and 60% *men* suffer from Depression, PTSD, Anxiety, and OCD.
Afghan Migration

- Estimated **350,000** Afghans reside in the United States
- Afghans in the United States reside in the San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento, Southern California, New York, Virginia, Texas, Georgia, and Oregon
- 3 migratory waves
  - *1st*: Following **1978** Soviet Invasion **6.2 million** fled Afghanistan
  - *2nd*: Following **1992** civil war
  - *2nd*: Following **2001** Operation Enduring Freedom, Afghans still immigrating
- Asylums, Refugees, Sponsored immigrants, and Special Immigrants (SIV’s) are the status of the Afghans entering USA
- **SIV’s** are former USG workers who participated in war against terrorism and supported the U.S. mission in Afghanistan
- Highest concentration of Afghan immigrants reside in Northern California
  - Estimate population of up to **40,000** while another 10,000 is estimated to reside in Southern CA.
Afghans are traditional, religious, and emotional people. They are divided in several tribes which each has its own cultural practices.

Known for greater hospitality, and are generally friendly. Treat guest with high respect.

Strong gender segregation.

Men lead family and usually make decisions for whole family.

Father and mother are highly respected, therefore they lead and make decisions for sons, daughter in laws, and grandchildren.

Father is responsible for the marriage of sons.
Afghans have **big families**. Married or unmarried sons, and unmarried daughters live in the same home with parents. Living separately for married sons big cultural shame.

Almost all **marriages** are arranged, usually by parents or elder of the family. Love marriages are practiced in big cities but are not always welcome and supported by families in long run.

**Big Marriage** ceremonies, usually from 300 to 3,000 people are invited. Gender segregation is applied.

Death: Mourn the first 3 days, then every Thursday until 40th day of the person’s death. Then, mourn on the 40th day, afterword every year mourn as annual death anniversary.

Both marriage and death are important cultural events to be attended by family members, relatives, friends.
Afghan Culture Cont.

- Urban women wear head scarf and while rural women wear Burqa. Afghan women do not hand shake with men. Usually, husbands, father or brothers represent them.

- Afghan women prefer female healthcare providers, specially OBGYN, Urologist, and for breast screening.

- It is recommended to have a female MA or nurse in room while a male provider physically exams an Afghan woman.

- Afghans do not eat pork or its products. Other meat must be Halal.

- Common drink is green and black tea.

- Ahmad, Mohammad, Abdul, and Ghulam are mostly first name’s prefixes and used as titles.

- Tribble and religious leaders are influential people. Tribble leader is called “Malik”, and religious leader is called “Imam or Mullah or Mowlavi or Mowlana”
Challenges

- Unemployment or under qualified employment
- Discriminations
- Language barriers, and lack of bilingual ESL classes
- Lack of strong Afghan community organizations
- Lack of cultural competent providers
- Resettlement problems, and not understanding their neighborhoods
- Poor cultural orientations
- No proper understanding of their rights
- No existence of brochures and other materials in Pashto or Dari languages
- No culturally competent employment opportunities for women. They are gradually developing anxiety and depression
2. IRAQ

- Iraq is situated in the western part of Asia, bordered by Turkey in the north, Iran in the east, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in the south, Jordan and Syria in the west.
Today’s Iraq was once **Mesopotamia**.

Iraq’s **population** of about 28 million is 75-80% Arabs, and 15% Kurds, with smaller numbers of Armenians, Assyrians, Turkmen and other minorities.

World’s oldest **human civilization**.

Arabic is the national **language**. Kurdish is the second official language. Other languages include Assyrian, Armenian and Turkish.
Why Are There Iraqi Refugees?

- **Fled** due to war, sectarian and religious violence and instability.
- More than 5 million Iraqis displaced, about 2 million have found refuge in neighboring countries (most in Syria, Jordan and Turkey).
- Most Iraqis are not able to return to Iraq safely or resettle permanently into countries to which they have fled.
Some minorities have become targeted for religious or ethnic reasons (such as Mandaeans and Yazidies).

Some Iraqis have suffered persecution for political reasons (believed to be supporters of former regime, insurgency, current government or multinational forces).
Education and Skills

- Before 2006, education was mandatory up to 6th grade.
- Most adults have acquired at least basic reading and writing skills.
- English proficiency among refugees varies widely.
- Iraqi refugees include highly trained professionals, shop owners, traders, skilled and unskilled workers.
- Most trained professionals have not been able to practice in their profession in asylum countries.
Cultural Practices and Traditions

- **Practices** and traditions are strongly determined by the level of education, social and religious background.

- **Greetings** (traditionally Muslim women do not shake hands with men).

- Islam sanctions a typical dress for women (**hijab**) though many urban women do not cover their heads.

- **Belief in fate** and determination has an influence over Iraqi life.

- **The left hand** is used for sanitary activities - offering to shake with the left hand may be perceived as an insult.
Religions And Ethnicity

- Iraqis reflect different ethnic and religious communities
  - Muslim (Islamic) Community
    - Islam is practiced by 97% of the population.
  - Christians make up 3%
  - Mandaean (Sabean) is Less than 60,000
Impact of War

- From 1990 to 2005, infant mortality rate increased 150%.

- In 2005 alone, 122,000 Iraqi children died before reaching age 5.

- In 2009, the child malnutrition rate was 22%.

- 2003-2007 school attendance was only 30% in Iraq.

- Youth are joining militias and becoming child soldiers.

- 500 Iraqi youth are in prison without charge.

- 80,000 Iraqis need artificial limbs.
Psychological Impacts of War

28% of Iraqi children suffer from PTSD
80% witnessed a shooting
68% interrogated or harassed by militias
77% affected by shelling/rocket attacks
72% witnessed a car bombing
23% of Iraqis in Baghdad have had a family member kidnapped
75% had a family member or someone close to them murdered
Iraqis in U.S.A

- Iraqi Americans live across the U.S. with other hubs of Iraqis living in the **Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Phoenix, and Washington DC** areas.

- **Atlanta** has developed a large Iraqi community; so has the state of **Texas**, primarily in the Houston and Dallas-Fort Worth areas.
Iraqis in USA

- Over 20,000 Iraqi Americans reside in CA (many tens of thousands live in San Diego and LA areas) but with the most concentrated in the communities of Modesto, Ceres and Turlock in Stanislaus County in Central Valley.

- Many of the 2,700 Iraqi refugees living in the Sacramento area have experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder but struggle to obtain mental health care services, according to the a report by the UC-Davis Health System Clinical and Translational Science Center, the Sacramento Bee reports.
Strengths of Iraqi Refugees

- Strong **desire** to work
- **Resilient**
- **Rich cultural** and cultural backgrounds
- Strong desire to have a safe and **good life** for their children
- **Skills** and work experience in home country may transfer to U.S.
3. SYRIA

- Population 2014 estimate of 17,951,639
- Syria officially called Syrian Arab republic, located in the middle east exactly in west Asia. Also called historically as “Bilad Al Sham” synonymously “Levant”.
- Syria was a target of many conquerors due to its location that connect the continents “Asia, Europe and Africa”, fertile plains, Euphrates river and oil resources discovered in the modern history.
- Syria is home to diverse ethnic and religious groups, including Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds, Circassians, Mandeans and Turks.
- Religious groups include Sunnis, Christians, Alawites, Druze, Mandeans, Shiites, Salafis and Yazidis. Sunni Arabs make up the largest population group in Syria.
Civil War Crisis

Since 2011, civil war and conflict between the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Syrian opposition forces, and ISIS, have resulted in more than 200,000 deaths and have caused more than half of the country’s population to flee their homes. The mass displacement of the Syrian people is the worst humanitarian crisis of our time.

The UN Refugee Agency estimates that more than 4 million people, half of whom are children, have fled to neighboring countries, and 7.4 million people are displaced internally within Syria. As the crisis worsens to the worst the world has seen in 20+ years, the need for refugee support is becoming more dire.
Challenges of Syrian Refugees?

- To escape, many Syrian refugees become victims of smuggling and human trafficking. Seeking safety in neighboring countries, refugees risk their lives traveling on unsafe boats, trains, and trucks.

- Thousands of displaced citizens are arriving each day to refugee camps in neighboring countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey. As the number of people fleeing from Syria grows, refugee camps are becoming even more overcrowded and struggling to meet the needs of Syrian Refugees.

- **Two million children** have been affected by the conflict in Syria, making continuing education while displaced extremely difficult. Additionally, refugee camps do not have the space to provide children safe spaces to learn and play.
Syrian Refugees in the US

- Since the Syrian Civil War began in March 2011, 1,584 refugees have been relocated in the U.S., the majority of whom have moved to Texas (180), California (171), Michigan (159), Illinois (132), Arizona (107) and Florida (97). Thirty other states have absorbed the rest, according to numbers compiled by the State Department.

- President Barack Obama has ordered his administration to "scale up" the number of Syrian refugees admitted to the United States in the coming year, directing his team to prepare for at least 10,000 in the next fiscal year.

- Number of refugees entered the US in Fiscal Year 2013 according to BUREAU OF POPULATION, REFUGEES, AND MIGRATION, US department of states:

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Religious and Cultural Overview

- **Sunni** Muslims make up about 74% of Syria's population and Sunni Arabs account for 59–60% of the population, most **Kurds** (9%) and **Turkmen** (3%) are Sunni, while 13% are **Shia**.

- **10%** Christian and **3%** Druze. Druze number around 500,000, and concentrate mainly in the southern area of Jabaal al-Druze.

- President Bashar al-Assad's family is **Alawite** and Alawites dominate the government of Syria and hold key military positions. In May 2013, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights stated that out of 94,000 killed during the Syrian Civil War, at least 41,000 were Alawites.

- The majority of the Syrian population are **conservative** due to the various cultural and religious backgrounds.
Aspects to Keep in Consideration

- Being conservative, the majority of Syrian women do not accept physical contact with male personnel even during medical situations. To address that concern, female medical professionals should be available at the time of medical examination/treatment.
- The majority of Syrian women do not assign male OB/GYN physician and always prefer female physicians.
- Many Syrian families treat their teenager female daughters as adult females and they have similar concerns to that of adult females.
- In case of unavailability of a female medical health provider in emergency situation, an oral consent is preferred from the female patient or from her spouse, sibling or parent.
- As Muslims are major component of the Syrian population, the majority of Muslims reject to consume products (food or medication) that contains pork meat or its extracts (ex: Gelatin). Vegetarian substitution could be provided.
THANK YOU!