INTEGRATING IRAQIS: FACTORS IMPACTING THE SUCCESS OF MUSLIM SETTLEMENT IN A RURAL TOWN

Rachel Woodlock
Centre for Islam and the Modern World
School of Political and Social Inquiry
Monash University
Caulfield, 3145
rachel.woodlock@arts.monash.edu.au

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Abstract

Cobram is a multicultural rural town in Victoria, and is the site of recent settlement by a sizeable number of Iraqi Muslim immigrants. The town has become well-known for its efforts to promote social inclusion and multiculturalism, however a number of factors impeding successful settlement also exist. These include the geographical remoteness of Cobram; inapposite comparisons made with Italian settlement that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century; health issues; as well as the existence of prejudice and expectations of the Iraqis' assimilation. This paper is based upon research gathered in Cobram during 2006.

INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at a number of factors impacting the success of Muslim settlement in a rural town. Specifically, it is concerned with Iraqi Muslim settlement and inclusion in Cobram: the largest rural town in Moira Shire, on the river-border between Victoria and New South Wales. The Bangarang Aborigines, speaking Yortayorta (or a variant) originally settled the area.[1] In 1845 Octavius Phillpotts took up the 'Cobram' pastoral station and waves of European settlers followed establishing farms, including a sizeable Italian market-gardener population from the 1920s.[2] From the late 1990s onwards, Iraqi Muslims began moving to Cobram initiating a rapid demographic shift. In little more than a decade, they have grown a population similar in size to the Italians. Due to the efforts of the Moira Shire council, community service providers, and community leaders from amongst the Iraqi Muslim population, Cobram has garnered publicity in local and state media as a success story for multiculturalism and the successful social inclusion of immigrants. The core population of settled Muslims is evolving into an established ethno-religious community of Cobram, and is doing this through various mechanisms including taking advantage of opportunities provided by the local council and community service providers, and also via resistance to stereotypical perceptions of their role and place in society. However, the Iraqi Muslims' successful settlement has not been without challenges from within and without. Whilst there exists an established body of research on the settlement of immigrants in Australia, as Taylor notes in "Refugees and

1. Ian D. Clark, *Aboriginal language areas in Victoria–a reconstruction: a report to the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages* (University of Ballarat, 2005), 22.

2. "Cobram, Victoria," *Australian places* (November 2004), `http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/ncas/multimedia/gazetteer/list/cobram.html` (accessed June 26, 2006).

social exclusion: What the literature says,"[3] little of this is specifically focused on the needs of humanitarian entrants, particularly those in remote areas.[4]

BACKGROUND

Since 1973, various governments officially endorsed the policy of Australian multiculturalism that replaced restrictions on non-white immigration and an expectation of migrants' assimilation. Over recent years, however, the former Liberal-National coalition government introduced a variety of policy changes at the federal level.[5] These changes were widely viewed as a retreat from multiculturalism, shifting the emphasis to citizenship and nationalism. Former Prime Minister John Howard himself heavily promoted the introduction of a citizenship test widely viewed as affirming a culturally-hegemonic perspective.[6]

3. Janet Taylor, "Refugees and social exclusion: What the literature says," *Migration Action* 26, no. 2 (2004): 4.

4. Exceptions include: Val Colic-Peisker and Farida Tilbury, "'Active' and 'passive' resettlement: The influence of support services and refugees' own resources on resettlement style," *International Migration* 41, no. 5 (2003): 61–91; Janet Taylor and Dayane Stanovic, *Refugees and regional settlement: Balancing priorities* (Brunswick, Vic.: Brotherhood of St Laurence, May 2005); Suzy Casimiro, Peter Hancock, and Jeremy Northcote, "Isolation and insecurity: Resettlement issues among Muslim refugee women in Perth, Western Australia," *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 42, no. 1 (2007): 55–69; and Samantha Prideaux, *Supporting migrant and refugee youth in Shepparton & Cobram* (Carlton, Vic.: Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, Cutting Edge–UnitingCare, 2005).

5. The Liberal-National coalition led by former Prime Minister John Howard lost the most recent federal election contested in late 2007.

6. Birthplace and visa-entry type have an impact on success rates for the citizenship test. For example, those from the skilled stream had a 99 percent pass rate, those from the family stream had a 92 percent pass rate, whilst those from the humanitarian programme had an 82 percent pass rate. As well, DIAC published a list of the ten largest migrating groups based on birthplace. Of these ten, the biggest failure rates predictably came from countries providing a large share of humanitarian entrants: Sudan, Afghanistan and Iraq, all Muslim-majority countries. Only 2 percent of applicants were from the Sudan, however their failure rate was the largest at 22.8 percent. They were followed by immigrants from Afghanistan (2.2 percent of applicants) with a failure rate of 19.9 percent. The third group was from Iraq (3.9 percent) who had a failure rate of 17.9 percent. In contrast, immigrants born in the United Kingdom formed the largest group of applicants at 16.3 percent of the total applicant population, and their failure rate was only 0.9 percent. Department of

Questions about immigrant Muslims settling in Australia have accompanied this shift in emphasis, including: concerns with the ability of such immigrants to learn and speak English; perceptions of problematic gender inequities in the cultures of immigrant Muslims; and doubt over whether they can absorb and reflect 'Australian values'. However, despite interest and concern with Muslim settlement, research on the phenomenon is relatively immature. Furthermore, whilst the majority of earlier Muslim migrants tended to settle in the cities, today an increasing number are being attracted to rural and regional Australia.

Bouma, along with Daw and Munawar, in "Muslims managing religious diversity," outlines the different coping strategies employed by Muslim immigrants in dealing with the inevitable stresses of immigration to and settlement in a new society, namely: avoidance; engagement; negotiation; and raising awareness of wants and needs.[7] All of these strategies are at play in the present study of Iraqi Muslim migration to Cobram. Bouma's earlier study *Mosques and Muslim settlement in Australia*, describes in detail how Muslims have employed these strategies, albeit within a metropolitan context.[8] Bouma found that religious practice aids (rather than hinders) the settlement process, helping migrant Muslims develop coping skills to deal with stresses of immigration. In "The settlement of Islam in Australia," Bouma argues that change is inevitable for both immigrants and the receiving society, in the negotiation of a new identity for a religious community.[9] Nevertheless,

Immigration and Citizenship, *Australian citizenship test: Snapshot report* (Canberra, July 2008), `http://www.citizenship.gov.au/_pdf/citztest-snapshot-report-2008-june.pdf` (accessed August 27, 2008).

7. Gary D. Bouma, Joan Daw, and Riffat Munawar, "Muslims managing religious diversity," in *Muslim communities in Australia*, ed. Abdullah Saeed and Shahram Akbarzadeh (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001), 53–72.

8. Gary D. Bouma, *Mosques and Muslim settlement in Australia* (Canberra, ACT: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994).

9. Gary D. Bouma, "The settlement of Islam in Australia," *Social Compass* 44, no. 1 (1997): 71–82.

the bilateral nature of change with the settlement of migrants from different religious backgrounds is not always acknowledged, and as Humphreys points out in, "An Australian Islam? Religion in the multicultural city," despite official policies promoting multiculturalism at various levels of government, there is still a widespread expectation that Muslims can and should assimilate into the majority Anglo-centric culture.[10]

In the report *The social costs and benefits of migration into Australia*, Carrington and McIntosh point out that migration is of great social benefit to Australian society, with the short-term costs (mostly associated with the immediate arrival, settlement and integration of migrants) outweighed by the long term benefits in terms of stimulating human, social and produced capital.[11] Shepparton, Cobram's nearest city, was singled out as an example of successful settlement, a mutually beneficial situation for the receiving society and the migrants themselves. The study was not designed to look exclusively at Muslim migration, however, and in their Shepparton case study, Carrington, Marshall and Reavell note concerns reported by participants of a possible culture clash between "middle-eastern Muslims and local residents," particularly in regard to gender issues, as well as problems arising from possible long-term welfare dependency of the (presumably Iraqi) humanitarian migrants, and the difficulties for immigrants to acquire fluent English and update their overseas qualifications.[12] Participants from the present study also discussed these issues and difficulties.

10. Michael Humphrey, "An Australian Islam? Religion in the multicultural city," in *Muslim communities in Australia*, ed. Abdullah Saeed and Shahram Akbarzadeh (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001), 33–52.

11. Kerry Carrington and Alison McIntosh, "Conclusions and further research directions," in *The social costs and benefits of migration into Australia*, ed. Kerry Carrington, Alison McIntosh, and Jim Walmsley (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2007), 184–90.

12. Kerry Carrington, Neil Marshall, and Ron Reavell, "Shepparton," in Carrington, McIntosh, and Walmsley, *Social costs*, 114.

Although Carrington et. al. did not consider Iraqi Muslim settlement specifically, an earlier study did. In 2004, Janet Taylor and Dayane Stanovic conducted qualitative research on the experiences of refugees settling in regional Victoria.[13] They studied the experiences of Iraqi Muslims settling in Shepparton and the mostly Christian Sudanese immigrants settling in Colac and Warrnambool, with a view to understanding the factors that promote or hinder social inclusion for refugees settling in regional Australia, and the effects of immigration and settlement policies on this group. In particular, Taylor and Stanovic used a framework for understanding social ex/inclusion by focusing on the three areas of rights, resources and relationships. As well, they distinguished between issues that are specific to refugees; issues that affect refugees but also other immigrants as newcomers, and finally issues that refugees and other immigrants experience but that are also common to residents of regional areas generally.[14] Their research found that informed choice is important for promoting settlement in regional Australia among refugees, and that advance planning and tailored provision of services and support, in consultation with the local receiving communities, is vital. Specific mention was made of the need for better provision of English language learning opportunities in regional areas, as well as the development of education and employment services designed specifically for refugees.[15]

Many of the phenomena described in the Shepparton research is relevant to Cobram, however there are also some differences specific to the latter as a rural town as addressed in the current paper.

13. Taylor and Stanovic, *Refugees and regional settlement*.
14. Ibid., 3–4, 52.
15. Ibid., 56.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study is a qualitative analysis of themes emerging from data collected during early 2006 as part of a research project that resulted in the report *Social integration of Muslim settlers in Cobram.*[16] In this paper, I concentrate on a particular area–factors impacting the inclusion of Muslim immigrants in Cobram–analysing it in greater depth.

In order to collect data, I conducted three fieldwork trips to gather data through participant-observation, in-depth interviews and a follow-up focus group. I sent letters of invitation to an initial introductory meeting with the research team to Muslim and non-Muslim community leaders in Moira Shire as well as service-providers to the Muslim community in Cobram.[17] On a second trip, I conducted sixteen in-depth interviews with participants representing various groups in the community: council members; employers; Muslim and non-Muslim community leaders; male and female Muslim immigrants; police; and service providers to the Muslim community. I also drew impressions about Cobram and the nature of migrant settlement to the area from secondary resources such as newspaper articles and reports, as well as participant-observation that included informal discussions with locals. I consequently transcribed, mind-mapped and coded observation notes and interviews, which allowed themes to emerge upon analysis. The research team then met with participants in a follow-up focus group and presented themes emerging from the preliminary analysis to allow for feedback and discussion.

16. Funding for this research was provided by the Scanlon Foundation. Many thanks are especially owed to Professor Gary D. Bouma for his feedback and encouragement, and to the residents, service-providers and community leaders in Cobram who generously gave of their time and resources to participate in the research.

17. The research team comprised Prof. Gary D. Bouma, Dr Shahram Akbarzadeh and myself.

Delimitations and Biases

The qualitative research paradigm requires that delimitations and possible biases be identified in order to help verify the trustworthiness of the presentation of the research. In this case, only a small sample of subjects took part, however I purpose-selected them in order to choose informants with particularised knowledge, so as to allow for the greatest opportunities for gathering data within time and budget constraints. One possible oversight was in not obtaining interviews with residents from Italian or Indigenous ancestry, however none were recommended through the snow-balling technique I used when obtaining interviews. As well, I limited interviews to adults with at least basic English competency. As such, I neither sought nor obtained perspectives of non-English speaking Muslims or children and youth, although issues raised in the present paper may well have direct relevance to these groups. Due to the sample's limited size, further research would need to be undertaken in order to be able generalise the findings.

In terms of bias, I am a Muslim of Anglo and Celtic ancestry who wears a head cover. As such, it is possible that participants may have self-edited their statements due to social-desirability factors, or to avoid appearing prejudiced when discussing sensitive topics. In an attempt to offset this possible bias, I minimised my Islamic dress with non-Muslim participants (wearing mostly Western-style clothing including caps instead of scarves). Alternatively, I attempted to foster trust with Muslim participants–many wary of being over-studied by outsiders–by introducing myself as a fellow Muslim. Thus, I hoped to be an empathetic listener, capitalising on my identity as both a sixth-generation Australian of Anglo and Celtic ancestry, and a practising Muslim.

ABOUT COBRAM AND THE SETTLEMENT OF IMMIGRANTS

Cobram is the largest town in Moira Shire, situated on the Murray River border between the two Australian states of Victoria and New South Wales, approximately 220 kilometres from Melbourne and 56 kilometres from Shepparton, as the crow flies. It is part of the 'fruit-bowl' region and the area's industries include agriculture, horticulture, viticulture and tourism.

Cobram has seen waves of settlement by different ethnic and religious groups giving it a long history of multiculturalism: Indigenous, North-West European, Southern European and most recently Middle Eastern. When looking at the current distribution of ethnicities and ancestries, North-West European and Oceanic ancestries accounted for the largest share of Cobram's residents, followed by Southern Europeans. The largest religion in Cobram is Christianity represented by a variety of denominations including the Catholic, Anglican, Uniting, Presbyterian and Reformed churches as well as a number of smaller Christian denominations. With the immigration of Iraqis and a small number of Afghan Hazara Muslims,[18] Islam became an established religion of Cobram.

Iraqi Muslim migration to Cobram was not purposely engineered, but appears to have been ad hoc, largely through word-of-mouth recommendation. One of the interviewees recalled the earliest Muslim migrants were sponsored by a doctor, and from this connection further settlement occurred. To migrating family and friends Cobram was promoted as a safe and friendly place with work opportunities. Other reasons given for the choice to settle in Cobram included the close-knit nature of the Muslim community; the

18. "Closing the gap for TPV refugees in Victoria: A state-wide action plan, 2005," 2005, `http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/TPV_action_plan_2005.pdf` (accessed June 27, 2006).

availability of public housing; and encouragement by immigration officials, although there was some discrepancy with this last point with one migrant recalling how he and his family were specifically discouraged from settling in Cobram by an official from the then Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs.

It is difficult to establish the size of the Iraqi Muslim population. The most recent census taken in 2006 recorded 5,531 residents in Cobram. Of these, 236 spoke Arabic at home, 230 voluntarily indicated they followed Islam, but only 126 specified they were born in Iraq, with no other Arabic-speaking country represented and 287 people declining to answer where they were born.[19] Of course, a substantial number of Arabic-speaking and/or Muslim residents are Australian-born children of Iraqi immigrants, however the discrepancy can also be explained by low compliance in answering census questions by Iraqis fearful of bureaucracy and the perception of government intrusion in their lives. So, whilst the census only records a four percent Iraqi Muslim population, local wisdom puts the figure closer to ten percent, comparable with the percentage of residents who were born in Italy or are of Italian descent.[20]

Having provided a brief introduction to Cobram and the settlement of different immigrant groups in Cobram, I will now discuss factors that have impacted the successful settlement and inclusion of Iraqi Muslims in Cobram. Some factors affect Cobram residents generally (such as the geographic distance to the nearest city) whilst others are unique to the Iraqis (such as the novelty of Islam and the Iraqi culture in Cobram).

19. Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Cobram (SSC 25361), basic community profile," 2006, `http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2001.0` (accessed October 30, 2007).

20. When the present author undertook field research in Cobram, the figure of ten percent was mentioned by a number of community service providers and local residents.

FACTORS IMPACTING SETTLEMENT

This section of the paper looks at factors acting as barriers to successful settlement: the geographical distance of Cobram impacting services available to locals generally and immigrants specifically; inapposite comparisons with Italian settlement and mismatched expectations of Iraqi employment; health issues including the problem of mental illness among some immigrants; the existence of prejudice and expectations of assimilation.

Cobram as a Remote and Rural Town

One pertinent issue is the geographical remoteness of rural towns and how this impacts service provision. In the past, Muslims mostly settled in the larger cities, however more recently, a number began settling in regional Australia, partly due to encouragement from official agencies keen to fill employment gaps.[21] Geographic remoteness is an issue that affects residents of rural towns throughout Australia, however in this paper we are concerned specifically with the Iraqi Muslim immigrants in Cobram, many of whom are refugees who entered Australia through the humanitarian program or on Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs).[22] Theoretically, humanitarian entrants (excluding those on TPVs) have access to a wide array of programmes and resources to facilitate their settlement in Australia,[23] and whilst this may

21. Glenn Withers and Marion Powall, *Immigration and the regions: Taking regional Australia seriously*, report (Chifley Research Centre, October 2003), 27–28, `http://www.appliedeconomics.com.au/pubs/pdf/rep03_immi.pdf` (accessed September 4, 2008).

22. For example, from the period between the 2001 census and data collection in Cobram–September 8, 2001 to 11 April 11, 2006–of the forty-two Iraqi Muslim immigrants who chose Cobram as their first place of settlement, thirty-five (83 percent) came through the humanitarian programme. These figures do not include those Iraqi Muslims who settled initially elsewhere and then later moved to Cobram, or those who declined to nominate their religion. Department of Immigration & Multicultural Affairs, "Numbers by migration stream," April 2006, `http://www.settlement.immi.gov.au/settlement/enterSelectReport.do` (accessed April 11, 2006).

23. Immigrants who come through the humanitarian program may be given different types of visas depending on their mode of entry to Australia and other factors. The most

be true of those who settle in metropolitan areas, the picture is altogether different for those who move to regional and rural Australia: service provision has not kept up with the increase in refugees and other immigrants from diverse backgrounds moving to rural towns.

As mentioned previously, Cobram is approximately sixty kilometres away from Shepparton, the nearest city with facilities such as a Centrelink office; health specialists; fully-fledged English language classes for adults; and intensive ESL support for school-age children. Accessing facilities, resources, and official government agencies in a city approximately sixty kilometres away imposes hardships on those immigrants with limited mobility, language barriers, who are employed during the working week, who are caring for young children or sick relatives, or who have mental and/or physical health issues that make travel difficult. As Greta,[24] a service provider, noted:

> Now you could have an appointment in Shepparton tomorrow, that causes them [Iraqi Muslim immigrants] some grief. ... We have outreach posts, but we don't have a Centrelink officer. So if you have problems with Centrelink, you have to go to Shepparton. Same with specialists: from mental health, to gynaecologists to opthamologists–you have to go to Shepparton. You can't get those sort of services here.

There also exists some antipathy and personality clashes between Shepparton and Cobram service provision organisations. As the nearest city, Shepparton is responsible for allocating certain funds and resources such as the provision of English language lessons through the Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE. Participants, including Iraqi respondents, reiterated the need

severely restricted are those on TPVs. See: Taylor, "Refugees and social exclusion," 2–3.

24. Pseudonyms have been used.

for adequate provision of English language lessons and translators, yet there was a strong theme expressed through a number of the interviews, that this need was not being met by current resource allocations. An adjunct issue was the limited availability of childcare for parents (particularly mothers) to facilitate their class attendance. This funding and resource problem may in part be due to Shepparton, with a large immigrant and refugee population of its own, being already stretched in its capacity to offer services.

Inapposite comparisons with Italian Settlement

As mentioned previously, Cobram has a long history of multicultural settlement. Italians began settling in Cobram in the late 1920s, with the community growing in size after World War II. Currently, residents with Italian ancestry make up ten percent of Cobram's population, with 6.2 percent reporting they speak Italian at home.[25] Moira Shire council has developed a relationship with an Italian sister-city, Varapodio, and holds *ItalFest*, an annual festival of Italian culture.

Overall, participants expressed the view that Italian settlement is largely seen as a success and a credit to multiculturalism in Cobram. It is little wonder, then, that the Iraqi Muslims are regularly compared with the older Italian community, but not always in the former's favour. Yet, the two populations have many important differences, beyond the superficial similarity of both being sizeable migrant groups.

- The post-World War II migration of Italians was largely a matter of choice, whereas the majority of Iraqi immigrants entered Australian through the humanitarian programme.

25. Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Cobram."

- The Italians had largely come from a rural farming town, and were able to set up market gardens in a very different economic climate, growing them into successful ventures. In contrast, many Iraqis are highly educated, having worked in professional fields before their need to migrate. Yet, the employment gaps that currently exist in Cobram are mostly for unskilled labour.

- The Italians that migrated were Christians (Catholics) settling in a largely Christian host society. This meant that church networks and systems of social support were already established. Islam was novel to Cobram when the Iraqis began settling; they are still building their religious institutions and networks of support.

- The Italians settled in Australia during the existence of the White Australia policy, when assimilation was emphasised. The Iraqis began settling long after the adoption of Australian multiculturalism.

- When the Italians migrated, there were few official programmes of support. All levels of government currently offer a wide variety of programmes to immigrants, depending on their status and needs.

In response to the question of whether the Italians are perceived as having been more successful at integrating, Hasan, a young Iraqi man, related:

> I talk with some Italian people and some people they feel that way. Some say, 'we didn't get help like your people get help.' Another thing is that there is not a lot of differences between the Italian and Australian cultures. I don't mean one is better than another, everyone is happy with his culture. [I mean] there is a bigger space between Iraqi and Australian culture. Everything

> was a little bit easier for the Italians back then, to make farms and businesses. I'm not sure that the government didn't help them, now it is a little bit different, a bit difficult. If I would like to make a business or farm, I need money–how do I get that? Everything is expensive.

Keith, a local employer saw things differently. Perhaps understandably, given his role in the community, he felt that the Italians became successful because they worked hard and took whatever work was available to them. Keith was worried that some Iraqis were abusing the welfare system and that the Iraqis were more isolated, due to differences in religion and culture, than the Italians. This was also touched on by council member Michael:

> The big difference between, say, the Italians and the Iraqis: the Italians came here and they had dirt and blood on their hands. They were manual workers, and they were prepared to labour: grow tomatoes, grow fruit, grow vegetables, anything like that. Whereas the Iraqis are a bit different. They're highly educated. . . . Well it's very hard to transfer them into our standards and our language and then to turn around and employ them. So with the Italians, they just went out and leased a bit of dirt off a farmer, and grew their six or eight acres of tomatoes and away they went. They knew how to do that. But the Iraqi population, it's a different challenge, because they're highly educated. Cobram's got none of those jobs for them.

As can be seen from the list above, there are substantial differences in the nature of Italian Catholic and Iraqi Muslim settlement in Cobram. Some differences made settlement easier for the Italians (such as having pre-existing

church networks of support), whilst others made it more difficult (such as the White Australia policy and lack of official immigrant support programmes). It does appear, however, the Iraqi community has a monkey to shake off its back in the form of a rose-coloured memory of Italian settlement.

Health Issues

As previously mentioned, the majority of Iraqi immigrants in Cobram entered Australia through the humanitarian programme. Refugees who were victims of torture and trauma as well as those forced to flee their homes due to war, chaos and threat of persecution, are a population vulnerable to mental health problems. This is compounded for those on Temporary Protection Visas who have limited access to services and facilities and have to deal with an uncertain future.[26]

Participants in the current research reported that some among the Iraqi Muslim community suffer from problems such as a sense of being stuck in the past, unable to move on; a loss of motivation and desire to succeed; as well as depression and other mental health problems. One service provider, Elaine, spoke of men she knew suffering variously with mild depression, bipolar disorder, and one that had a "psychotic episode" in a language class she was teaching.

Fatima is a young Iraqi woman. She noted a difference between those immigrants who had fled to Iran some years earlier before coming to Australia, and those who came directly from Iraq:

> Maybe the people from Iraq [here in Cobram] have a closed idea because Saddam [Hussein] did not allow them time to do something. Because the people who came to Iran changed their idea.

26. Taylor and Stanovic, *Refugees and regional settlement*, 6–7.

> The people who come to Australia, the language is a barrier, they stop. The women who came from Iran have a different idea. They study, they like life, they want to change, they not stop. But the women who come from Iraq they stop. They just sit in their home and not do anything, because they are suffering. This is women in my community.

Notwithstanding some major differences such as language and ethnicity, Iran and Iraq are much closer in terms of culture and religion (not to mention geography) than are Iraq and Australia. Although the current study is not a psychological profile of refugee mental health, it is possible that those migrants who had moved to Iran as an intermediate step between Iraq and Australia, were able to make the migrant transition more easily. It may also be that as the settling Iraqi Muslim community develops its own permanent support networks and infrastructure in Cobram, it may be in a position to assist newer refugees with their transition, and thus minimise further exacerbation of pre-existing mental health issues.

It is also here that geography places a distinct barrier for this particular population in that the very specific counselling and psychiatric services needed to treat those suffering from serious mental health problems (particularly the unique needs of victims of torture and trauma) are unavailable in such a remote location. Whilst there are good general medical services available to the Iraqis, including Arabic-speaking GPs, more specialised facilities in Shepparton or Melbourne are not always easily accessible to those who need them.

Even if such specialised facilities for victims of torture and trauma were available in Cobram, a stigma exists associated with seeking help, particularly among men ashamed of being seen as weak and, for the unemployed,

being unable to fulfil the role of father-provider. Language barriers also play a role in preventing sufferers from seeking help. Not only in their having to seek help and counselling in a foreign language (English) but use of the few translators available in a small town is perceived as compromising confidentiality and anonymity. Rightly or wrongly, there is also a perception that non-Muslim and non-Iraqi counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists may not have a thorough grasp of Iraqi culture and religious values, and may be inexpert in modelling treatment specific to Iraqi Muslims' requirements.

One self-help response to mental health problems, is for some immigrants to turn to religion, to become more religious then they would have been back in Iraq. This has at times been interpreted by the wider community as the Iraqis becoming strictly conservative, and potentially isolated. Greta was a former Maternal and Child Health nurse who visited new mothers in their homes. She related the following:

> The local priest (sic) explained to me, that they are protecting themselves. They are in a new country. They have gone back to being very veiled and very private. And back to very strict religious ways to protect themselves. It's like a new beginning. They're in a foreign place so religion protects them.

When mental health needs are left unaddressed, apart from the impact on individual sufferers, the community also has to bear the brunt of damaging stereotypes. In this case, depression and the resulting inability of some immigrants to seek employment, becoming dependent on welfare, is interpreted by the general community as laziness. Severe psychiatric illness suffered by some individuals, is interpreted as an instability of Iraqi immigrants generally. As Elaine explained: "If the story of a situation like that [the psychotic breakdown of the male language student] gets out, it makes it much harder

[for them] to find employment. 'They're all crazy, they're all bloody suicide bombers, what if he'd had a bomb etc.' " Another service provider, Susan said:

> Because there is a lack of understanding around the physical and psychological trauma that's often associated with refugee experience, people don't understand the mental health issues that exist in the community. They see the lethargy perhaps and call it laziness as opposed to understanding it's chronic depression, but there is just a lack of awareness and understanding of the complexity of the issues.

Burnout and fatigue among service providers is another related health issue, although not limited to the situation of the Iraqi Muslim migrants in Cobram. Burnout and fatigue is a problem when service providers are performing roles beyond normal capacity for an extended length of time. Similarly, burnout occurs among carers of the physically and mentally ill, in many cases the wives and families of sufferers.

Prejudice and Expectations of Assimilation

The existence of prejudice and ignorance is another substantial impediment to successful settlement. Global crisis events and Australia's involvement in the Iraq war have contributed to a rise in racially and religiously motivated discrimination, intimidation and physical attacks against Muslims in Australia.[27] Zahra, one of the older Iraqi immigrants, related a number of experiences of prejudice, ignorance and even violence:

27. *Isma' - listen: national consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians* (Sydney, 2004), `http://www.hreoc.gov.au/racial_discrimination/isma/index.html`; Tanja Dreher, *'Targeted': Experiences of racism in NSW after September 11, 2001*, UTS Shopfront Research Monograph Series No. 2 (Broadway, NSW: UTSePress, 2006).

> I didn't face any problems, except when September 11 happened. And we are worried if something happens to Australia or another European country because that reflects on us. Some people just think we are terrorist. ... Last week, I went to the supermarket and there were bad guys, rough, and dirty. They said bad word, with his friend, 'there are terrorists in Cobram!' ... Yes, and this shop [owned by Muslims] just last year, the window glass was smashed.

In 2003, local media reported on a number of problematic events, although it is noteworthy that these were vastly outweighed by more positive news stories about the local Iraqi community in the years before and after. In March 2003, immigrants in Cobram went on strike to protest against incidents of prejudice, discrimination and violence against Iraqis in the community (*Cobram Courier*, March 19, 2003). It is not insignificant that this occurred during the lead-up to the US invasion of Iraq, a sensitive time both for the Iraqis in Cobram, and the general population given Australia's commitment to support the US. It is also noteworthy that the Iraqis chose a democratic instrument (a peaceable strike) to make public their case. Furthermore, the police responded by holding a meeting with members of the Iraqi community to address their fears.[28] Also in 2003, local media reported an arson attack that destroyed the premises of the Cobram International Mini Mart, an Iraqi-owned business (*Cobram Courier*, October 15, 2003).

Some participants in the present study expressed concerns over the potential inability for Iraqi Muslims to integrate into the community, particularly given certain religious practices and restrictions, such as gender segregation;

28. At the time of data collection, an Arabic liaison officer had been appointed to facilitate good community relations between the police and the Iraqis.

food and alcohol prohibitions; and marked differences in dress. Paul an elder in the Cobram community noted: "When they first arrived (this was early on when it was difficult) they wanted a soccer team of their own and we said 'no you gotta go and play with the others.' The problem is now, the soccer teams are desperate for kids, but they won't let the kids travel." Michael worried about gender segregation: "Just from the education side of it, the girls are not allowed to do swimming, music, and all this sort of thing and the boys can basically do what they like, whereas we treat both sexes alike. If they wanna go swimming they can go swimming, they can do whatever they wanna do, but they [Iraqi Muslim girls] can't."

It is true that there are significant cultural and religious differences between Iraqi Shi'is and other ethnic and religious groups in Cobram (such as the dominant North-West European ancestry Christians). It is possible that religious differences are reinforced and even magnified by some immigrants as a way of coping with the transition from their original culture into their new homeland. Nevertheless, some residents' concerns are based upon an underlying expectation that immigrants should assimilate into the majority culture.[29] The expectation that new immigrants should learn to think, speak and even look like those who already possess a uniformly self-evident Australian-ness still exists, multiculturalism notwithstanding. White immigrants from English-speaking nations can easily assimilate, whereas others should assimilate but are hampered by difference in language, culture and even physical appearance.

Iraqi participants' responses in the current research reveal they make a distinction between those aspects of Australian culture important for them to understand and adopt, and other aspects of Iraqi culture important for

29. James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 22.

them to maintain, even in the face of varying levels of pressure to assimilate. Although individual Iraqis draw the distinction at different places, in the former category lies the need to acquire English language proficiency; taking part in local sports and non-religious festivities; interacting with the local media; forging relationships with the council, police, service providers and other organisations in the community; lobbying for their needs to be met; making roots in the community; taking up Australian citizenship; and developing friendships with others.

- Hasan: "Being forty or thirty-five, he's [the Iraqi male] not comfortable to learn English, but it should be learned."

- Fatima (speaking about a women's fashion parade and information night involving the Iraqi women): "When we told our story, they understand we are women same as they are. We feel happy and sad and same emotions. They changed their ideas and understand. ... And after then, some women invited us to come to their houses, and they served us lunch and chat."

- Muhammad: "One day we [Iraqis] make a meeting for the community, by the Civic Centre, by the help of the Shire, for the Harmony Day." In reply to whether the meeting was well attended: "Yes, many people, women and men, and there is some photo [in the *Cobram Courier*]."

Non-negotiable beliefs, practices and customs revolve around maintenance of religious beliefs and customs such as food and alcohol prohibitions; having their own place of worship; gender segregation; dress; and teaching Arabic to their children.

- Layla (in response to a question asking if she would like to socialise with members of the wider Cobram community): "Yes, I would like

that. But I not like for meeting men and women, because I am not good English, I am shy. With women, I would like."

- Hasan: "It's easy for Italian people to go to a night club but our community, we can't."

- Zahra: "The children have Arabic lessons, in order not to forget the Arabic language, and to read the Qur'an."

CONCLUSIONS

There are many positive features of the immigration, settlement and establishment of the Iraqi Muslim community in Cobram and the town has become well-known for its efforts to promote inclusion and multiculturalism. The focus of the present paper, however, has been on a number of factors impacting the success of settlement, namely: the geographical remoteness of Cobram; inapposite comparisons made with Italian settlement that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century; health issues; as well as the existence of prejudice and expectations of the Iraqis' assimilation.

Some factors affecting Iraqi Muslims are experienced by residents of Cobram generally. This includes the geographical remoteness of Cobram, particularly in the availability and quality of funding and resources to the town. Government programmes designed to assist new immigrants, especially refugees and victims of torture and trauma, are not always available in Cobram, or accessible where they exist in Shepparton and Melbourne. For example, the need to acquire English language skills was a strong theme that arose from the data, as was criticism of the amount and availability of English classes and resources, and the existence of an institutional antipathy between Shepparton and Cobram. This was communicated by Iraqi par-

ticipants as well as council members and service providers, although praise was given for the philanthropic endeavours of the Myer-Fairley Foundation, which had provided funding for the establishment of a permanent location for English language classes.

Inapposite comparisons with the older Italian settlement that had principally occurred during the first half of the twentieth-century is problematic in that it hinders recognition of the unique experiences and needs of the Iraqi Muslim community, as well as negatively colours perception of the genuine success of Iraqi settlement so far. The Iraqi population is approaching the Italian population in size, yet the two communities have significant differences, not the least of which is the passage of time that has naturally lent a rose-coloured hue to memories of Italian settlement.

Health issues are a serious factor impacting the success of settlement. The majority of Iraqi immigrants in Cobram came through the humanitarian programme. Refugees who were victims of torture and trauma as well as those forced to flee Iraq are a vulnerable population when it comes to mental health. As well, there are those suffering depression and other forms of physical and mental disease, due to a variety of reasons including: vulnerability for those who are TPV holders; the stress of unemployment; having to cope with a major transition as an immigrant from one country and culture to another; and bearing the burden of caring for family members who are also ill. Despite this, Cobram does not possess the specialised type of mental health care doctors, counsellors and facilities needed to address the unique needs of this population. Stress and fatigue also exist among service providers catering to the Iraqi community, when they are stretched beyond capacity to fulfil their roles.

The existence of prejudice and expectations that the Iraqi Muslims should

assimilate into a normative Anglo-Australian culture, is another factor impacting the success of settlement. Iraqi Muslims in Cobram have been affected by international crisis events and in particular the war in Iraq. Many positive encounters were described in data collection between Muslim and non-Muslim residents in Cobram, however a variety of negative encounters were also mentioned. Upon analysis of the Iraqis' responses, it is clear there is a distinction made between elements of the host society that Iraqis wish to adopt, and yet there are also non-negotiable Iraqi beliefs, practices and customs, they wish to maintain.

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