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Iraqi Immigrants in the United States

MARCH 5, 2009 SPOTLIGHT | By Aaron Terrazas

The number of Iraqi immigrants in the United States tripled between 1980 and 2007, from 32,121 to 102,000. Most of this growth occurred during the 1990s. However, Iraqis still constitute less than 0.5 percent of all immigrants in the United States.

Although the United States has committed to accepting increasing numbers of Iraqi refugees, the number admitted from Iraq was still below 2000 levels until 2008.

The Iraqi born tend to have a similar demographic and socioeconomic profile to the overall foreign-born population, but they are much more concentrated in certain states and metropolitan areas. Over half of all Iraqi immigrants in 2007 lived in Michigan and California (for more information on immigrants by state, please see the **2006 ACS/Census Data tool on the MPI Data Hub**).

This Spotlight focuses on Iraqi immigrants residing in the United States, examining the population's size, geographic distribution, socioeconomic characteristics, and admission categories using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey (ACS) and 2000 Decennial Census, and the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) for 2007.

Please note that the American Community Survey includes only a small sample of Iraqi immigrants. The 2007 population estimates represent a point estimate in a probability distribution; the actual value may differ somewhat from the estimate. For a basic understanding of sample design, estimation methodology, and accuracy of ACS data, **[click here](#)**.

Click on the bullet points below for more information:

Size and Distribution

- There were about 102,000 foreign born from Iraq residing in the United States in 2007.
- Iraqi immigrants made up 0.3 percent of all immigrants in 2007.
- In 2007, over half of all Iraqi immigrants resided in Michigan and California.

Demographic and Socioeconomic Overview

- One of every five Iraqi foreign born in the United States has arrived since 2000.
- Nearly two-thirds of Iraqi immigrants in 2007 were adults of working age.
- Iraqi immigrant men outnumbered women in 2007.
- The majority of Iraqi immigrants were U.S. citizens in 2007.
- Almost half of Iraqi immigrants in 2007 were limited English proficient.
- Among limited English proficient Iraqi immigrants in 2007, half spoke Arabic.
- One-fourth of Iraqi foreign-born adults had less than a high school education.
- Iraqi immigrant men and women were less likely to participate in the civilian labor force than foreign-born men and women overall.
- Nearly one-quarter of employed Iraqi-born men worked in sales.
- About 27 percent of employed Iraqi-born women worked in construction, extraction, and transportation.

Admission Category of the Iraqi Immigrant Population

- More than 33,000 Iraqis have gained lawful permanent residence in the United States since 2000.
- Refugees and asylees accounted for 38 percent of Iraqi-born lawful permanent residents admitted in 2007.
- The number of Iraqi refugees resettled in the United States declined between 2000 and 2007 but increased dramatically in 2008.

Size and Distribution

There were about 102,000 foreign born from Iraq residing in the United States in 2007.

The 1980 census counted 32,121 Iraqi immigrants, a number that grew 40 percent to 44,916 in 1990, and then doubled to 89,892 by 2000. The 2007 American Community Survey estimated there were 102,393 Iraqi immigrants in the United States, a 14 percent increase since 2000.

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Iraqi immigrants made up 0.3 percent of all immigrants in 2007.

In 1980, Iraqi immigrants composed 0.2 percent of all foreign born in the United States. That share increased to 0.3 percent in 2000 and remained unchanged in 2007 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Total and Iraqi Foreign-Born Populations, 1960 to 2007

Year	Foreign born	Iraqi born		
		Rank ^(a)	Share of all foreign born	Number
1960	9,738,091	n	n	n
1970	9,619,302	n	n	n
1980	14,079,906	60	0.2%	32,121
1990	19,797,316	56	0.2%	44,916
2000	31,107,889	53	0.3%	89,892

2007	38,059,555	52	0.3%	102,393
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Notes: ^a Rank refers to the position of the Iraqi born relative to other immigrant groups in terms of size of the population residing in the United States in a given census year.
Source: Data for 2000 from the 2000 census; 2007 data from the American Community Survey 2007. Data for earlier decades from Campbell Gibson and Emily Lennon, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 1990" (U.S. Census Bureau Working Paper No. 29, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1999). **Available online.**

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In 2007, over half of all Iraqi immigrants resided in Michigan and California.

In 2007, Michigan had the largest number of Iraqi immigrants (36,172, or 35.3 percent), followed by California (16,715, or 16.3 percent). Together, these two states accounted for 51.7 percent (52,887) of all Iraqi-born immigrants. Illinois and Arizona also had large Iraqi-born populations.

Over one-third (34.2 percent) of the Iraqi immigrants in the United States lived in one metropolitan area: Detroit-Warren-Livonia, MI (35,010). Chicago-Naperville-Joliet, IL-IN-WI; Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ; and San Diego-Carlsbad-San Marcos, CA, also had large Iraq-born populations.

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Demographic and Socioeconomic Overview

One of every five Iraqi foreign born in the United States has arrived since 2000.

As of 2007, 19.1 percent of the 102,000 Iraqi foreign born entered the country in 2000 or later, and 43.2 percent entered between 1990 and 1999. An additional 15.3 percent entered between 1980 and 1989, 16.7 percent between 1970 and 1979, and the remaining 5.8 percent prior to 1970.

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Nearly two-thirds of Iraqi immigrants in 2007 were adults of working age.

Of the Iraqi immigrants residing in the United States in 2007, 8.0 percent were minors (under age 18), 65.7 percent were of working age (between ages 18 and 54), and 26.3 percent were seniors (age 55 and older).

Of the foreign-born population in the United States in 2007, 7.8 percent were minors, 69.6 percent were of working age, and 22.6 percent were seniors.

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Iraqi immigrant men outnumbered women in 2007.

Of all Iraqi immigrants residing in the country in 2007, 53.8 percent were men and 46.2 percent were women.

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The majority of Iraqi immigrants were U.S. citizens in 2007.

Among the Iraqi foreign born, 65.7 percent were naturalized U.S. citizens in 2007 compared to 57.4 percent among the overall foreign-born population.

Back to the top**Almost half of Iraqi immigrants in 2007 were limited English proficient.**

About 8.7 percent of the Iraqi immigrants age 5 and older reported speaking “English only” while 44.2 percent reported speaking English “very well.” In contrast, 47.1 percent reported speaking English less than “very well,” slightly lower than the 52.4 percent reported among all foreign born age 5 and older.

(Note: The term limited English proficient refers to any person age 5 and older who reported speaking English “not at all,” “not well,” or “well” on their survey questionnaire. Individuals who reported speaking only English or speaking English “very well” are considered proficient in English).

Back to the top**Among limited English proficient Iraqi immigrants in 2007, half spoke Arabic.**

The most common language spoken among Iraqi immigrants age 5 and older who reported speaking English less than “very well” was Arabic (52.8 percent), followed by Syriac/Aramaic/Chaldean (28.5 percent) and Kurdish (10.9 percent).

Back to the top**One-fourth of Iraqi foreign-born adults had less than a high school education.**

In 2007, about 25.7 percent of the 91,000 Iraqi-born adults age 25 and older had no high school diploma or the equivalent general education diploma (GED) compared to 31.9 percent among the 31.6 million foreign-born adults. About 30.7 percent of Iraqi-born adults had a high school diploma or GED compared to 24.0 percent among all foreign-born adults.

On the other end of the education continuum, about 27.1 percent of Iraqi immigrants had a bachelor's degree or higher, about the same as among all foreign-born adults (27.0 percent). About one in six (16.5 percent) of Iraqi-born adults age 25 and older had some college education (less than a bachelor's degree) or an associate's degree compared to 17.1 percent of all foreign-born adults.

Back to the top**Iraqi immigrant men and women were less likely to participate in the civilian labor force than foreign-born men and women overall.**

In 2007, Iraqi-born men age 16 and older were much more likely to be in the civilian labor force (72.4 percent) than Iraqi-born women (36.6 percent). Both Iraqi-born men and women were much less likely to be in the civilian labor force than all foreign-born men (79.0 percent) and women (54.8 percent).

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Nearly one-quarter of employed Iraqi-born men worked in sales.

Among the 36,552 Iraqi-born male workers age 16 and older employed in the civilian labor force, 23.4 percent reported working in sales; 17.9 percent in management, business, and finance; and 17.0 percent in construction, extraction, and transportation (see Table 2).

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About 27 percent of employed Iraqi-born women worked in administrative support occupations.

Among the 15,571 Iraqi-born female workers age 16 and older employed in the civilian labor force, 26.8 percent reported working in administrative support occupations; 19.0 percent in service occupations; and 15.9 percent in manufacturing, installation, and repair occupations (see Table 2).

Table 2. Occupations of Employed Workers in the Civilian Labor Force Age 16 and Older by Gender and Origin, 2007

	Iraqi foreign-born		All foreign-born	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Persons age 16 and older employed in the civilian labor force	36,552	15,571	13,476,859	9,081,914
Total percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Management, business, finance	17.9	6.9	10.2	10.2
Information technology	2.6	0.7	3.8	1.9
Other sciences and engineering	3.8	1.2	3.9	2.1
Social services and legal	0.2	1.9	1.1	2.0
Education/training and media/entertainment	2.9	9.4	3.3	7.0
Physicians	1.4	2.6	1.2	1.0
Registered nurses	0.4	2.2	0.3	3.4
Other health-care practitioners	0.5	1.6	1.0	3.0
Health-care support	0.0	4.3	0.6	5.2
Services	10.0	19.0	17.2	25.7
Sales	23.4	15.9	7.8	10.6
Administrative support	3.9	26.8	5.3	14.8
Farming, fishing, and forestry	0.0	0.0	2.5	1.1
Construction, extraction, and transportation	17.0	2.6	26.9	3.2
Manufacturing, installation, and repair	16.1	5.1	14.8	8.9

Source: 2007 American Community Survey.

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Admission Category of the Iraqi Immigrant Population

More than 33,000 Iraqis have gained lawful permanent residence in the United States since 2000.

Between 2000 and 2007, 33,349 Iraqi-born immigrants obtained lawful permanent residence (LPR) in the United States – about 0.4 percent of the 8.1 million immigrants who received LPR status over the same period. The Iraqi born also accounted for 0.4 percent (or 3,765) of the 1.1 million immigrants who received lawful permanent residence in 2007.

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Refugees and asylees accounted for 38 percent of Iraqi-born lawful permanent residents admitted in 2007.

Of the 3,765 Iraqi born granted LPR status in 2007, 37.8 percent (1,422) were refugees and asylees, 27.2 percent (1,023) were the immediate relatives of U.S. citizens, 20.7 percent (778) were family-sponsored immigrants, 12.8 percent (481) were employment-based immigrants, and the remaining 1.6 percent (61) were diversity and other immigrants.

(Note: The diversity visa category, which is authorized under section 203(c) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, makes available 50,000 permanent resident visas annually to persons from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States. Potential immigrants must apply for eligibility and visas are awarded at random by lottery selection.)

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The number of Iraqi refugees annually resettled in the United States declined between 2000 and 2007 but increased dramatically in 2008.

The number of Iraqi refugees resettled in the United States declined from 3,158 in 2000 to a low of 66 in 2004 before rising to 1,608 in 2007 (see Table 3). In 2008, however, the number of Iraqis admitted to the United States as refugees rose to 13,823.

As of February 4, 2009, DHS had admitted 4,479 Iraqi refugees for fiscal year 2009 (which began October 1, 2008).

In addition, the Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 authorized 5,000 special immigrant visas each year for fiscal years 2008 through 2012 for certain Iraqis who worked for or were contractors of the U.S. government in Iraq for at least one year after March 20, 2003.

Table 3. Number of Iraqi Refugees Resettled in the United States, 2000 to 2008

Year	Number
2000	3,158
2001	2,473
2002	471
2003	298
2004	66
2005	198
2006	202
2007	1,608
2008	13,823

Source: Department of Homeland Security, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics.

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For information about ACS methodology, sampling error, and nonsampling error, **click here**.

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