

**Fear, Insecurity and Risk:  
Refugee journeys from Iraq to Australia**

**Sue Hoffman  
BA (Hons); M Lead**

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
at Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia, 2010.

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research. It contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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## **Abstract**

Between 1999 and 2001 almost 13,000 refugees made their way to Australia from the Middle East region. About 4,800 of them were Iraqi who had first fled to neighbouring countries such as Iran, Jordan and Syria, then to Indonesia via Malaysia. After negotiating with people smugglers, the vast majority boarded unsafe wooden boats bound for Australia. Some never got that far, instead finding themselves stranded in Indonesia. This thesis follows 22 participants as they travelled from the Middle East, across south-east Asia, onto the people smugglers' boats and - for those who made it that far - onto Australian shores.

Grounded theory was influential in the methods used to interview participants and contributed to the analysis phase, from which a number of themes emerged. Central to these was the insecurity and uncertainty faced by participants over a protracted period. They spoke about the psychological impact of their experiences and there is a marked difference when comparing the narratives of the participants settled in Australia with those living in a limbo situation in Indonesia. The former recalled the stresses of their journey and the associated feelings of fear, anxiety and depression. In the case of the latter group, these feelings were ever present as their journey was not yet over.

The thesis examines the relations between participants and the people smugglers. Although the majority of participants were critical, about one quarter considered the smugglers in a positive light as people who helped them find a place of safety.

The thesis also considers the actions of the governments of those countries where participants spent varying amounts of time, and the impact of these actions upon participants' security and safety. Here, the thesis draws on two theoretical approaches associated with risk: the governmentality approach and Ulrich Beck's theory of the world risk society. It is argued that governments' actions increased the risk and danger faced by the participants, and extended the periods during which they experienced extreme stress and uncertainty.

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Big thanks to Anne Pedersen who first encouraged me to undertake this research as a doctoral study and supervised me for the duration. Anne has been much more than a supervisor, she is also a valued colleague and friend, whose advice and feedback has been invaluable during the 4½ years of this project. One of the suggestions Anne made early on was that Trish Harris would make a wonderful supervisor. She was right. As the research developed, Trish's guidance and feedback have been tremendous, demonstrating thoughtfulness and insight. Whenever I've needed assistance or advice, Trish has been there, always patient and always supportive.

My thanks also to Marg Hutton whose website [sievx.com](http://sievx.com) has been a repository of so much information related to refugees' boat journeys. My involvement with those who lost loved ones when SIEV X sank has been a significant driver in undertaking this thesis.

The heroes of this work are the participants who so generously invited me into their homes and lives and told me their stories. This work is really about them. Their stories, while individually unique, are sadly typical of so many of the stories I have heard from members of the Iraqi refugee community and from the many other refugee communities. My hope is that with the fullness of time, their hopes will be fulfilled.

I would like to acknowledge the management and staff of the Association for Services to Torture and Trauma Survivors (ASeTTS), the Coalition for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Detainees (CARAD) and the Centre for Advocacy, Support and Education for Refugees (CASE for Refugees). These three agencies, all based in Perth, assisted me in a number of ways, not least in accessing participants. They all do fantastic work.

I cannot complete these acknowledgments without mentioning Mohammad Hashim Al Ghazzi, also known as Abo Roma. It was through him that I was able to make contact with Iraqi participants in Indonesia. He also was also my unofficial cultural advisor, explaining aspects of Iraqi, Arab and Muslim life and providing me with Arabic translations of English documents such as the consent letter which participants signed. He has been right behind me for the duration of the project. Another person who helped me immeasurably was Dr Najah Jafaar. I thank you for your time, your generosity, your insight and your language skills. And to Ash, wherever you are, for the hours and hours of riveting conversation. I wish you well my friends, my life is richer for meeting you. Salam Aleykum.

## RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Aspects of my research have been published in various forms. These include the following.

1. Hoffman S. (2010) 'Looking back, looking forward: Australia, Indonesia and asylum seekers since 1999' in (eds) Perera, S., Seal, G. & Summers, S. (2010) *Enter at own risk?: Australia's population questions for the 21st century* Black Swan Press: Perth, Western Australia.

The content of this book chapter is drawn from the following thesis chapters:

- Chapter 7 Countries of first asylum
- Chapter 8 Transit countries
- Chapter 9 The high seas and the people smugglers

2. Pedersen, A., Kenny, M.A., Briskman, L., & Hoffman, S. (2008) 'Working with Wasim: A convergence of community' *The Australian Community Psychologist* Vol. 20, 57-72

For my contribution to this journal article, I drew on research I had undertaken for the following thesis chapters:

- Chapter 2 Refugee movements and state responses
- Chapter 10 Arrival in Australia
- Chapter 11 Psychological impact

My doctoral research has attracted considerable interest from the media. For example, in May 2009, I was an invited guest on SBS's Insight program and in June 2010, I appeared on ABC's Stateline program. I have also been interviewed a number of times for mainstream radio stations and newspapers.



## ACRONYMS

ACM	Australasian Correctional Management Pty Ltd
AFP	Australian Federal Police
ASeTTS	Association for Survivors of Torture and Trauma
CARAD	Coalition for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Detainees
CASE	Centre for Advocacy, Support and Education for Refugees
DIAC	Department of Immigration and Citizenship
DIMA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
DIMIA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs
DSM-IV	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV
INP	Indonesian National Police
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
JSCM	Joint Standing Committee on Migration
KAR	Kurdistan Autonomous Region
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
NEIS	New Enterprise Incentive Scheme
NGO	Non-government organisation
PTS	Political Terror Scale
PTSD	Post traumatic stress disorder
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RRT	Refugee Review Tribunal
SCALES	Southern Communities Advocacy Legal and Education Service
SIEV	Suspected illegal entry vessel
TPV	Temporary Protection Visa
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
USCRI	US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants