Iraqi Refugees and the Rhetorical Situation

One million--a number almost impossible to conceptualize. It is more than twice the population of Iceland. It is the number of years ago that homosapiens were first using fires. One million is also the number of Iraqi citizens who are displaced as a result of the conflict in Mosul. Iraq has struggled ever since a coalition of Western forces invaded in 2003. The Islamic State (ISIS) took advantage of the turmoil and invaded Iraq under the cover of regional unrest as the civil war in Syria began in 2011. By 2014, ISIS had seized the cities of Anbar, Sinjar and Mosul. This brutal takeover caused about six million people to flee their homes and disproportionately affected Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city. In October 2016, an amalgamation of Iraqi soldiers, Kurdish forces, and US-led coalition warplanes began an offensive to take back Mosul and free the 1.5 million Iraqis living in the city under brutal ISIS rule. Lasting nearly a year, the offensive eventually succeeded in taking back Mosul, but not without difficulty. One million Iraqis fled the city, 325,000 of which had to live in makeshift refugee camps on the edge of the city. Hundreds of thousands more were forced to relocate to the eastern side of the city, due to fighting being concentrated in the west.

Throughout the battle for Mosul, many non-governmental humanitarian aid organizations provided shelter, food, water, and emergency care to the displaced Iraqis. One such organization was the International Rescue Committee, or IRC, a non-governmental organization that provides humanitarian aid to those affected by wars, violence, and displacement. Programs through the IRC provide refugees with emergency cash, temporary housing, help resettling, schooling, and protection against gender-based violence within refugee camps. Since beginning work in Iraq in 2003, the IRC has assisted roughly 95,000 Iraqis (“Iraq”). The IRC also publishes articles about
various conflicts, and in 2017, they published an article about the humanitarian crisis in Mosul, Iraq. In this paper, I will explain the reason for the article (also known as the exigence), the article’s target audience, and the constraints of the International Rescue Committee’s article on the Mosul crisis, and argue that it is indeed effective because it is rife with infographics and pictures of impoverished refugees to appeal to the reader’s empathy, includes easy-to-read statistics, and ends with a link to the donation page. The article’s effectiveness is due to the handy layout and infographics, moving image of a refugee mother and child, and dispulsion of negative stereotypes surrounding Iraq and Iraqis.

The International Rescue Committee’s article “Mosul in Crisis: The end of the battle does not mean an end to suffering” details how even though the military campaign officially concluded in July 2017, more than a million Iraqis were still in precarious conditions due to “ongoing insecurity and the destruction left behind in villages and neighborhoods.” Finalized in July 2017, the article recounts the reasons behind the crisis in Mosul (brutal ISIS rule and violence during the campaign to retake the city), why Mosul is important (it is the second largest city in Iraq), and what humanitarian concerns Mosul still faces. Its main aim is to dispel the notion that because the city has been retaken by the official Iraqi government, aid is not still needed. A secondary goal is to inspire readers to donate to the IRC, so the IRC can put the money towards aiding the refugees. The article informs the reader of the harsh conditions ISIS inflicted on Mosul, including how they left unexploded weapons littering the city, so people cannot return to their homes (“Mosul”). Furthermore, the article provides statistics on the number of displaced Iraqis and the number of wounded, as well as detailing the work that the IRC has done and continues to do in Iraq.
Bitzer: Pioneering the Rhetorical Situation

Lloyd F. Bitzer, author of the 1968 journal article “The Rhetorical Situation,” created a general consensus among the academic community as to what a rhetorical situation is. In Bitzer’s view, a rhetorical situation is “pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself” (3). Essentially, the rhetorical situation is the context in which the authors create the discourse (language, written or spoken). The rhetorical situation is composed of three main elements—exigence, audience, and constraints. Bitzer defines exigence as “an imperfection marked by urgency… [that can be fixed through] positive discourse” (6). In other words, exigence is any kind of defect or problem that can be amended through discourse. Audience is fairly self-explanatory; it simply means who the discourse is intended to be read or heard by who can also facilitate the change. Constraints are (intentionally) the most hard to define aspect of a rhetorical situation. Bitzer explains that rhetorical constraints are “persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (8). Though this definition is broad, it encapsulates a variety of phenomena, which was precisely Bitzer’s intention. A constraint is simply anything that occurs within the situation that inhibits the action(s) needed to modify the exigence. Despite Bitzer’s complicated terms, the concepts of exigence, audience, and constraints are quite simple, and can easily be found in the IRC’s article.

Rhetoric and Bitzer’s Ideas Within the Article

The IRC wrote the Mosul article in response to the plight of Iraqi refugees fleeing Mosul, and how they do not have adequate resources; this could be considered their exigence. Exigence must be able to be fixed through language, and the lack of resources could be fixed by language
because language can inspire donations, which the IRC would put towards resettling and aiding refugees. The exigence is backed up by the fact that the article indisputably states that there is a humanitarian crisis due to perilous conditions, informing the reader that “over 820,000 people remain displaced around the city… as temperatures approach 120 degrees, living conditions in the [refugee] camps are increasingly difficult” and “civilians who remained in Mosul or have returned continue to face dangers… and suffer from shortages of food, water, and power” (“Mosul”). This establishes that there is an obvious humanitarian crisis that threatens the lives of these people, and therefore, the crisis is the IRC’s exigence.

The general public is painfully unaware of the humanitarian crises plaguing the Middle East and Iraq-- most Americans’ knowledge of Iraq is limited to associating the nation with crashed planes, brutal dictators, and a religion they are woefully uneducated on. The IRC is aware of this fact, and take special care to establish background and a brief history of conflict in Iraq.

Since the IRC takes such pains to ensure that the article is informative for the expert as well as the novice, the intended audience for this piece is all Americans (since this was published by the US branch of
the IRC). This is demonstrated at the very beginning of the article, when the IRC included the two subheadings shown in Figure 1, which briefly yet comprehensively explain the reasons for the crisis. The large font draws the reader’s eye, and the short paragraphs incentivize the reader to not skip over it. Including this background information makes the rest of the article as accessible for someone with no prior knowledge. In the same vein, the sidebar of main points included in the article demonstrates that the audience is all-inclusive. Through this sidebar, the article caters to those who do not possess the time or interest to read the entire piece; this quick highlights section allows it to be accessible to that audience. Both the background information and the bare-bones sidebar exemplify how the audience is everyone.

This article is, however, bound by certain constraints. In this scenario, the most important constraint would be people’s misconceptions about Iraqis and the situation in Iraq. Since the Gulf War, there has been an abundance of misinformation about the Middle East in general, particularly Iraq: the country is a hotbed of perpetual violence and bloodshed, all Iraqis are inherently anti-American, Iraqi men are oppressive, dictatorial figures and Iraqi women are helpless victims in need of saving. These fallacies cause Americans to become unable to picture Iraq and its citizens as they are: normal people, with families and jobs and hobbies. To be sure, there are differences between Americans and Iraqis, but the removal of humanity has caused Americans to not understand the plight of the Iraqi refugees, and be hard-pressed to sympathize. Therefore, the main constraint of the article is this disconnect. The IRC attempts to combat this constraint by including a jarring picture of an Iraqi mother and her two children after they fled Mosul. The image (Figure 2) immediately causes the reader to feel sympathy towards the woman; the desperation on her face is unmistakable. The children in the picture are also
striking-- they are very young, and that causes the reader’s heart to go out to them. The feelings of sympathy the image elicits causes cognitive dissonance within an uneducated or bigoted reader. How can the people that have been so thoroughly vilified be so obviously in pain and appear so far from the radicalized caricature they have come to accept? The IRC’s awareness of their main constraint allows them to attempt to circumvent the problem altogether.

The article is a fitting response to the rhetorical situation, due to a plethora of compelling writerly choices. It is the best response to meet their goal of acquiring donations that will be used to provide aid to those affected by the crisis. First, the layout of the article is compelling because it makes use of an infographic that provides a succinct explanation of the situation. The infographic, seen in Figure 3, utilizes eye catching colors and simple bullet points in order to present the information.

Figure 2: an Iraqi woman and children, having just fled Mosul (“Mosul”).

Figure 3: an infographic in the IRC’s article (“Mosul”)
in an accessible manner. Since the audience is all Americans, this is an appropriate response to the situation. Not everyone is interested enough to read an entire article, but the infographic is concise and attention grabbing, thereby meeting the first goal of informing the public on the situation.

In the same vein, the statistics within the article are logically listed in layman’s terms, so as to make them accessible to everyone. Rather than dense paragraphs of monotonous numbers, the piece lists facts and figures in bulleted lists divided into categories: the specific humanitarian concerns facing Mosul, how the IRC is helping Iraqis who fled Mosul and are now in refugee camps around Iraq, and how the IRC helps Iraqis who fled to Syria. This layout accomplishes the IRC’s goal of dismissing the notion that because Mosul is retaken by the Iraqi authorities, humanitarian aid is not necessary. Likewise, the infographic and formatting also fulfills the secondary purpose of garnering donations, as it provides enough information to inspire people to read the entire article, which contains even more heart wrenching first person accounts, and consequently donate. In addition, once the reader reaches the end of the article, they are presented with a link that beseeches them to “get involved: make a donation today to help families affected by the conflict in Iraq and other emergencies worldwide.” (“Mosul”) When the link is selected, the reader is rerouted to the Donations page, emblazoned with a large “Donate Now” banner and headlines informing the reader that all donations are tax deductible, as well as an image of a refugee mother and son. Farther down the page, the donation options are presented; donations can range from $15 to $1,500. The incorporation of the donation link at the end of the Mosul article forces the reader to at least consider immediate action, if not actually donate. The promise within the link that the donor’s money will go to families helps persuade the
reader to donate-- it is much harder to refuse donating to a broken family, like the mother and son pictured on the Donations page.

The International Rescue Committee’s article “Mosul in crisis: The end of the battle does not mean an end to suffering” demonstrates all the tenants of a rhetorical situation as defined by Bitzer. The reason for the article’s existence is the end of the battle for Mosul and the ensuing lack of resources for refugees, the intended audience is all Americans, and the main constraint that could (but did not) prevent the article from achieving its goal is the public’s misconceptions about Iraq. The article was the most fitting response the IRC could have issued because it informs the public of the situation using a variety of techniques (listed stats, infographics, first person accounts), garners sympathy for the refugees, and therefore makes the reader more likely to donate. The IRC’s article did facilitate change-- after publishing, they received donations that allowed them to “organiz[e] apprenticeships, training and job matching” (“Creating opportunities…”)) to incentivize citizens to return once the city was safe. Today, Mosul is starting to see some semblance of normalcy. Two years after ISIS was finally pushed out, many Iraqis are returning to make new homes, as the majority of residential neighborhoods were destroyed in the battle. A recently-opened cafe exemplifies the progress that has been made; it is aptly named the Freedom Cafe. While there are still ISIS militants found occasionally in the city, the return of peace is beginning-- and was made possible, in part, by organizations like the International Rescue Committee.
Bibliography


“Creating Opportunities and Jobs for Young People in Mosul after ISIS.” *International Rescue Committee (IRC)*, 24 Jan. 2018,


“Mosul in Crisis: The End of the Battle Does Not Mean an End to Suffering.” *International Rescue Committee (IRC)*, 7 July 2017,