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Emigrating from Iraq in the period 1991-2007: social networks as alternatives for international protection

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INTRODUCTION

The current context of Iraqi exile migration can be conceptualised as a continuation and amplification of previous trends characterised by more insecurity in Iraq, the growing number of exiles who compete for asylum, and less international protection. This presentation puts current Iraqi migration in perspective, looking back at the period 1991-2003, to argue that a social organisation specific to Iraqi migration has emerged in response to migration and asylum structures in reception countries. I will first look at the policy context of reception regionally and in industrialised countries, then I will examine migrants' strategies to ensure their security, and I will conclude on the resulting social fragmentation.

I POLICY CONTEXT OF RECEPTION

Regional: from an inner to an outer barrier

- From the 1990-1991 Gulf War until the fall of Saddam Hussein in April 2003, while domestic push factors to leave Iraq were strong, the regime restricted and discourages exit through a number of financial disincentives and security measures. This had a self-selecting effect on migrants. With the exception of the 500,000 refugees who massively fled to Iran in 1991, of the 35,000 who fled to Saudi Arabia, and of those who crossed clandestinely into Turkey from the Kurdish autonomous areas, only those with enough financial assets and the relevant social relations available from within Iraq could manage their way out to Jordan - the only country which consistently maintained an open-door policy- including those who would have preferred escape to Iran but were deterred by the fact that the border with the Islamic Republic was rendered almost impassable after 1993.
- In the post-Ba'athist period, push factors have become extremely strong and exit is theoretically permitted. However neighbouring countries have either sealed exit routes (case of Saudi Arabia and Turkey), or recently restricted access (Jordan and Syria), while clandestine entry into the latter is extremely challenging now that the occupation forces have militarised the borders on the Iraqi side. These measures have been acting as a new selection mechanism amongst would-be exile migrants: in order to enter, one needs to be able to mobilise relations with Iraqis legally established in the host country, or with nationals of the host country, or with foreign organisations legally registered in that country. Neighbouring countries are in fact increasingly aiming at sieving new migrants through their control system to allow in only the ones who meet their national criteria.

- In both periods, migrants' assets have been located within social networks and have required from migrants the ability to connect to, and to mobilize the capital embedded in these networks. Entry requirements have merely changed the type of networks, and hence the profile of the migrants who have been able to exit Iraq.

Reception policies of immigrants in general can be framed within an asylum or an immigration regime. In the case of Jordan and Syria, reception is framed by immigration laws, a situation that is viewed as problematic by several international agencies. However, findings from other urban contexts show that, for urban refugees, having as status as a refugee or as a resident does not make much difference in their lived experience and opportunity context, as long as they can manage secure livelihoods. What makes the difference is legality that guarantees entitlements and rights, or illegality that produces vulnerability and insecurity.

In this regard, it is revealing to consider which countries in the region have absorbed the flows of exiles and which ones have let it pass through them since 1991. Before 2003, Iran absorbed the larger part of a flow of half a million refugees because of a generous asylum policy and the possibility left to Iraqi exiles to set up their own sectarian-based community organisations. Yemen also retained a large flow, albeit smaller (50,000 adding up to same number from Iran-Iraq war), by applying the principles of Arab unity, i.e. by regarding Iraqis as residents with right to work, education and social benefits. The flow to Syria (1998-2007) was also largely absorbed thanks to reception policies that granted Iraqis a relatively stable legal status including access, however informally, to the work market and communal and political activities. On the other hand, Jordan has always been largely a transit country arguably because it has regarded the vast majority of long-term Iraqi migrants and their communal activities as illegal. Of the estimated 1 million exiles who came to Jordan between 1991 and 2003, only 350,000 remained on the eve of the American invasion, out of whom a mere 30,000 professionals and investors had been granted residency. On a smaller scale, the same situation was reproduced in Turkey and Lebanon. In all these countries, concern for political activism from the part of exiles has been high.

It is as much the absence of any meaningful protection within a refugee regime as the absence of guarantee of safe livelihoods within a migration regime that has created a context of vulnerability and insecurity for most exiles in countries of the region.

Adding up to the insecurity of legal status, several factors have led to the geographical dispersion of members of the same family, among them changing entry and residency regulations and the need for diversifying strategies of livelihoods, security and emigration. The result is a push to continue migration away from the region in order to reconstruct livelihoods durably and safely and to reunite with family members. The growing pull of social networks in the diaspora at large and the possibility of direct communication with them from within Iraq since 2003 now induce more and more prospective migrants to envision their migration within a transcontinental scope even before leaving Iraq, which was much less the case in the previous period.

Consequently, the trend of secondary movements, very high in the pre-2003 period with an estimated one million - that is half the total number of exiles-, is likely to increase, and this, arguably despite the restrictionist measures adopted by industrialised states.

Industrialised countries: from deterrence to containment

Since the early 1990s, concomitant with the growth in the flow of asylum seekers from Iraq trying to escape countries of imperfect first asylum in their region of origin, potential asylum countries in Western Europe, North America and the Asia-Pacific have been moving towards restricting legal avenues for migration. These restrictive policies have evolved from stricter regulatory measures aimed at deterring migrants to containment in the region of origin and finally to the externalisation of asylum in so-called “safe third countries” in the regions of origin or at the outer borders of blocks of industrialised states. The result has been that a ‘wall around the north’, as some analysts have called it, was in effect erected. However, analysts have found no evidence that deterrence measures have had a notable impact on the number of asylum claimants. Rather, these measures have empowered new illegal actors and have criminalised the search for asylum. Probably the vast majority of the half million Iraqis who have launched an asylum claim in Europe and Australia since 1992 have resorted to the services of document forgers, smugglers or other providers of migration services operating outside or at the margin of legality. Another side effect of deterrence and containment measures has been to affect the scale and distribution of migration, for example between European countries, but also between distant regions. There are evidences that the Australian route was opened as 1999 as an alternative to European clandestine circuits that were becoming more costly and risky.

In this context, the only legal avenue to asylum has been through refugee resettlement programmes, especially since their expansion has often accompanied restrictive policies. Such has been the case with Australia and a number of European countries. Here too, a strict selection process is at work, combining two concerns of western governments: on the one hand their international and domestic obligations of refugee protection, and on the other hand the selection of migrants that correspond to national criteria supposed to facilitate integration: age, education and professional background, religious affiliation, size of the family, etc. Because numbers of resettled refugees are relatively small (80,000 between 1992 and 2006) this avenue for international migration may appear marginal. Yet resettlement has the potential for setting in motion and propelling a strong mechanism of chain migration. To give only one among many examples, the 20,000 Iraqi Shi’i resettled from Saudi Arabia in the USA between 1992 and 2003 were joined by tens of thousands more relatives and co-religionists who used other types of migration avenues to the extend that, within less than a decade, a totally new Iraqi Shi’i community anchored itself in the US with its institutions, politics and emblematic locations.

In the post-2003 period, we are witnessing a global convergence of migration management policies. This process, initiated by Western European countries in the early 1990, was accompanied by similar trends within industrialised states located on other continents. Currently, Middle Eastern governments are - intentionally or not- emulating western states’ restrictive policies. In terms of migration management, this global dynamic has resulted in the creation of several concentric walls around Iraq that multiply the containment capacities of distant western states.

While states are increasingly able to project their power across borders, controlling the destiny of asylum seekers, putting their security and bodily integrity at risk, asylum seekers have aimed at restoring their security using transnationality as a

counter dynamic of global projection. In absolute terms there has not been less but more secondary movements. But the many concentric layers impeding the international movements of Iraqis have operated a selection between different categories of people fleeing insecurity at home, from the least able to find resources and assets to cross borders, who have remained locked inside Iraq as IDPs, to the ones most apt to mobilise the resources needed for long-distance international migration to a country that offers effective protection. Caught between intermediate layers of walls, some eventually manage to reach the final destination they aim for, while others fail at one stage or the other and remain locked in countries where vulnerability is the rule.

II. MIGRANTS' STRATEGIES FOR SECURITY

Within the structural context described above, migrants have sought to ensure their individual and collective security by mobilizing assets and resources.

Security of the family

Security concerns are collective because Iraqi exile migration is rarely an individual undertaking. Rather, in the vast majority of cases, families are the relevant social unit to consider for understanding migration strategies and histories. This is because:

- Families, as much as individuals, have been the targets of violence in Ba'athist as well as in post-Ba'athist Iraq;
- In migration, families are the main basis for network and support-system formation;
- Migration splits families because of:
 - Collective survival and livelihood strategies (breadwinner goes to find resources abroad and sends remittances)
 - Migration strategies (for eg, wife and/or under-age child migrate ahead to improve chances of entering legal avenue by launching asylum claim as woman head of household or unaccompanied minor)
 - Conditions of migration (too old or too frail to follow safely)
 - Access and reception policies that do not comply with the principle of family unity and do not allow entry or re-entry to family members
 - Discriminatory policies practiced by states (banning one Shi'i while allowing one Sunni member).

The main aim of most Iraqi migrants is to maintain the integrity of their family. What matters to them initially is that all members reach a safe location, or several safe locations even geographically distant from one another. Efforts to regroup come at a second stage. Choice of a place to regroup is often the result of a compromise between the safety options different countries offer to Iraqi migrants and the capacity of the various family members to access particular countries. When finding family security in one place does not appear to be possible, family unity may take priority over security concerns. Some people do go back from neighbouring countries to unsafe locations in Iraq to be reunited with family members who cannot make it into any neighbouring country.

Local resources

From the perspective of refugees, protection is usually conceptualised as a quest for personal and family security while states are not conceived of as the only sites of protection. Protection may indeed be exerted or mediated by, and hence sought from many local sources: patronage networks (professional, political, ethnic, kin-based, etc), churches and mosques, more informal communal, friendship or residential groups, etc. Some of these sources also have a transnational scope and can be tapped into as sources of financial support while in a regional host country.

In neighbouring countries, many Iraqis are already socially networked into the host societies. For one, not all migrants who come from Iraq are refugees. Many Iraqis in Syria, Jordan and elsewhere are there for business, family or other reasons while some of their relatives or personal and professional relations are refugees. Such relations provide refugees with anchors to resocialise and access means of livelihoods.

On the other hand, migration from Iraq has a long history in most countries of the region. In Syria, Assyrian and Chaldeans have been coming as refugees since the 1930s, while Shi'i have had an established communal presence since the Iran-Iraq war. In Jordan, there is a long history of emigration to the country that started with the 1958 toppling of the monarchy, and was amplified during the Iran-Iraq war. The same holds true for several Gulf countries. In Yemen, still since the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqis have occupied positions as university professors, physicians, surgeons and have created ethnic niches, for example as barbers and hairdressers.

For those who do not manage to mediate protection in a country of the region though mobilizing social networks and making the best out of patronage, there are other tools for self-protection in insecure environments: settling in urban contexts to secure relative anonymity, avoidance of institutions and organisations, distrust of neighbours and acquaintances in the work place or in the aid system, and hence the use of self-narratives to conceal identity or present strategic ones, etc.

Transnational social networks

Exile migrants, either from neighbouring countries or from within Iraq in the post-2003 period, have strived to mobilize existing transnational linkages or to create them in order to undertake long-distance migration. They have tapped migration resources into the following networks:

- Transnational exile communities (families, kins, friends, professional or school relations; for money, sponsorship, marriage, etc)
- Transnational institutional actors (churches and other religious communities and organisations; for sponsorship, money, assistance in transit, etc.)
- Transnational political actors (such as ethnic organisations and exile political parties)
- Transnational illegal organisations (smuggling syndicates for illegal migration services)

To activate these networks, facilitating factors have been the development of telecommunications (in particular internet and mobile telephones) and money transfer services now directly available from within Iraq and previously mainly accessible from Jordan.

Those migrants with only local networks in neighbouring countries have been unable to engage in transcontinental migration. However, it can be argued that, on the longer-run, more and more migrants with only local-level connections will be able to create or activate relations of a transnational scope. This is because the more Iraqi exile communities have been growing the more social capital for international migration has become available to an ever larger number of prospective migrants from Iraq.

This process took up in the early 1990s, when resettled refugees from countries neighbouring Iraq and other categories of migrants consolidated existing communities of Iraqis in industrialised countries or created entirely new ones. For the last fifteen years, these communities have been acting as pull factors for family members left behind in Iraq, in the Middle East or anywhere on the globe where no asylum and no stable socioeconomic prospects are available.

III SOCIAL FRAGMENTATION

Well before the current sectarian drift in Iraq, there was a global geopolitical organisation of Iraqi exile in which sectarian and ethnic identities were factors as meaningful as ideological orientations. It is well known that, in the pre-2003 period, in the USA as well as in Iran, leaders of political exile organisations have redefined themselves in sectarian terms in order to access funding and patronage. But other less obvious mechanisms have induced or reinforced social fragmentation among Iraqi migrants at several stages of their migration.

To start with, regional policies that govern access and residency are not universally applied to all Iraqis. On the contrary, access and the granting of entitlements are fundamentally unequal and based on sets of social criteria such as sectarian affiliation, ethnicity, political orientations, education, class, wealth, etc. Therefore, the opportunity structure of Iraqi migrants varies widely alongside class and sectarian lines. Reception policies in regional hosts have either fostered migrant community representation or have discouraged it but have compelled a large number of migrants, especially illegal and unable to claim rights, to resort to communal support networks. These contrasted policies have converging outcomes: making sectarian or ethnic identities meaningful for migrants and exiles, sometimes more than they were before leaving Iraq. Communal identities have been further reinforced by the policy of some industrialised states that have been selecting immigrants and refugees for resettlement along communal criteria, or have allowed communal, particularly faith-based organisations, to become the patrons of Iraqi refugees through private refugee sponsoring schemes.

But communal resocialisation is also an endogenous dynamic. In the distant exile communities, large numbers of migrants have regrouped along religious or ethnic lines. Iraqis moving to the USA chose, and continue to choose, Dearborne or LA if they are Shi'i, and, if they are Chaldeans, San Diego, Detroit, Phoenix or Chicago. When they did not have an anchor community to provide them with social capital, migrants found ways to create such communities. Connections were made through religious institutions, mosques and churches, because these are already altogether charitable organisations, protection mediators, and transnational institutions. In turn, reinforced by the new diasporas, or borne out of them, several faith-based or ethnic-

based organisations have provided individuals who have successfully (sometimes strategically) claimed membership to them with financial support for long-distance migration and resocialisation in destination countries.

To the converging containment policies asylum countries have adopted, Iraqi migrants have responded by a converging family-oriented strategy and converging tactics to reach their aims: mobility, irregularity, recourse to close-knit networks where relations are based on trust or on contractual exchanges.

What has emerged and keeps emerging from the interaction between evolving institutional factors and migrants' agency are patterns typical of post-Cold War exile migration yet a social organisation specific to Iraqi exiles. The pattern is characterised by its global scope, the extreme dispersal of migrants and families, a picture that keeps evolving as families and broader communities regroup in a limited number of locations in the industrialised world, while regional exile communities close to home are stabilizing either through lack of transnational social linkages, or through access to very good local connections. The social organisation, and in large part the geographical distribution, of Iraqi migrants is characterized by its social fragmentation along class, ethnic and sectarian lines.

It can be argued that this fragmentation has resulted in large part from states' inability or unwillingness to perform their obligations of protection indiscriminately towards their own citizens (successive regimes in Iraq) or towards refugees (from Middle Eastern states to industrialised countries). Only rights produce protection which in turn produces security. As a result, a considerable number of Iraqi refugees harbour little sense of obligation and loyalty towards individual states and the international system that protects states' interests. They hold in suspicion and have a utilitarian view of the international refugee regime and its agents, such as UNHCR, and of states' concerns for territorial sovereignty. But they are more likely to express loyalty to and identification with the social or political units other than states that have been taking upon themselves the responsibility of ensuring their safety.