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Presentation 3: *Syrian state sovereignty in the context of Iraqi migration*

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This paper examines how the Syrian government exercises state sovereignty in the context of Iraqi migration. Sovereignty exists on the one hand as an abstract, ideal concept and on the other as a lived reality, in which diverse, local practices of government agents produce sovereignty in the domestic, as well as the international arena. Drawing on data collected during long-term, ethnographic fieldwork in Damascus, this paper analyses how the Syrian government manages Iraqis on its territory, through what governance techniques Iraqis become integrated into Syria’s body politic and what Iraqis’ position says about how citizenship and sovereignty is produced and lived in Syria. Iraqis in Syria blur the boundaries between foreigner, refugee and citizens and show that sovereignty in Syria is created via different social relations than those assumed by the global ideal of sovereignty stipulated in international law and humanitarian actors.

Constructing domestic sovereignty: Syrian state agents and Iraqis

One of the most interesting aspects of Iraqi immigration to Syria concerned the interactions between Iraqis, Syrian-state officials/clerks and Syrian policy making. The consistencies and inconsistencies, congruence and incongruence between these different levels of rule gave insights into how population governance was created in Syria, and how the state and its sovereignty existed through these interactions. Comparing the daily-life experiences of Iraqi interlocutors with state rhetoric about Iraqi plight, with the assumptions about Iraqis contained in humanitarian programmes and with official state policies proved key to understanding the different levels on which Syrian state sovereignty was constructed and upheld, most importantly concerning the fine line between internal, ‘domestic’

sovereignty and external, 'international' sovereignty.

The lived experience of Iraqis in Syria differed in important aspects from the way Iraqi immigration was constructed as an abstract, social 'field' in media stories, NGO reports and Syrian state presentations and policies. But at the same time, the effects of certain, powerful ideas about how Iraqi life must be going on in Syria, which shaped governmental and NGO interventions in Iraqis' lives, filtered into Iraqi lived reality and affected how Iraqis viewed themselves, what hopes they had, what opportunities they confronted and how they positioned themselves vis-à-vis the Syrian and the Iraqi states. The following paragraphs will focus on the Syrian state's presence in Iraqi daily life, both in very personal interactions with officers and clerks, as well as on the more abstract level of changes in immigration policies and their enforcement. The aim of these paragraphs is to tease out how Syrian state sovereignty was constructed in these strategies of population and migration management, and to compare these strategies with those stipulated by the sovereign ideal. A further aim is to show the enormous complexities of actions that sovereignty-creation requires, and the delicate beliefs, assumptions and ideas that it relies on.

Iraqis in Syria: visas and immigration rules

The immigration regime governing movement of Iraqis into Syria underwent significant changes during the past five years, which coincided with the dramatic upswing of Iraqi immigration post-2006, and the increasing international attention to the issue.¹ As reported by those Iraqi interlocutors who had entered Syria by 2006, until early 2007 Iraqis entered Syria without a visa, simply receiving a stamp into their passport upon entry. This ease of access was a remnant of Syrian pan-Arab politics, which officially awarded Arabs a status between foreigner and Syrian, with important benefits such as visa-free travel and much lighter residency and work-permit regulations. In practice, political and other considerations led to considerable variations in how citizens from different Arab states were treated at Syrian borders; during Saddam's times the Syrian-Iraqi border notably opened or closed to migrants depending on the political climate.² The growing restrictions on Iraqi immigration since 2007 have culminated in a situation today, in which Iraqis must obtain a visa from the Syrian embassy in Baghdad

¹ Given the enormous implications and details related to these changes in immigration policy, only a small fraction will be highlighted here. Further details on the matter will be provided in the chapter on Daily Life of Iraqis (chapter XYZ).

² Chatelard, G. 2011, 'The Politics of Population Movements in Contemporary Iraq: A Research Agenda', in R. Bocco, J. Tejet & P. Sluglett (eds), *Writing the History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, World Scientific Publishers/Imperial College Press, London.

to transit the border; this visa is only awarded for certain reasons, such as medical treatment in Syria or the pursuit of higher education. Proof of such reasons, for example through a fake medical report, is reportedly often obtained through corruption.

The administrative changes to the immigration regime had a transformative effect on how Iraqis experienced the Syrian state and sovereignty. Those interlocutors who entered Syria before the growing restrictions reported on the ease with which they passed the borders, for example describing their entry as:

*“No, the entry was easy. Only the passport...No problem. The people were smiling when we came, the police, they smiled for us and said hello, their style was very nice at the beginning, in 2006, 2005.”*³

Or

“When you left Iraq, was it easy to get a visa at the border?”

*“For Syria? Yes, immediately. There was no visa at the beginning. When we came, there was no visa required for Syria. Immediately we entered. They stamped the passport, but we didn't have to pay anything. Now a visa is required, since about two years. The operation at the border was easy then. Yes, very, directly we entered.”*⁴

In these descriptions, Iraqis encountered the most direct, physical manifestations of state sovereignty – border crossings – in a benevolent manner, with a very weak impact on their actions and behaviour. Bureaucratic and security routines were weak, hardly distinguishing Iraqis from Syrians and marking the transition from one sovereign territory to the next in a soft way.

When discussing the question of entry to Syria from Iraq with Iraqis who entered Syria since the increased restrictions, a different image emerged. One mother of an Iraqi girl who had come to Syria in 2009 to participate in an NGO education-programme described the elaborate routines necessary to obtain a visa: the obtaining of a fake doctor's report, the dangerous and unpleasant visits to the Syrian embassy in Baghdad, the waiting times and expenses, amounting to around USD 50 per visa. Another

³ Interview with Iraqi man, 14.02.2010

⁴ Interview with Iraqi man, 17.01.2010

interlocutor described her transit, which she had arranged through a company specialising in arranging packages covering travel, paperwork, visa and transit. Such a package cost USD 200.

"...they take you in special buses, very clean ones, but it is expensive. And they will give you the visa..."

"Without you having to go to all the different places to get the visa?"

*"Yes, they take you in a special bus. When you reach the border, they help you to register and go to the offices and the officials. And it's very, very easy, everyone can do it, but it takes so much time...they sign it quickly, but when they search the car and the bus, they asked us Why are you coming here? and I told them I have a treatment for my eyes for laser, but this is not true. (Laughs)."*⁵

These different experiences show very tangible transformations in how Syrian state sovereignty was performed, upheld, created vis-à-vis Iraqi immigrants, through increasingly complicated bureaucratic requirements, changing personal interactions between border guards and migrants, and higher costs. The examples of petty corruption as a solution to formal requirements again highlights how legal codes did not hold abstract power per se in Syria, but rather enforced networks of patronage and discrimination against poor people, through which sovereignty was experienced and constructed.

Constructing international sovereignty: Syrian state agents and international actors

The emergence of Iraqi immigration as an international humanitarian and political concern brought Syrian government actors into contact with various international and foreign institutions. In their interactions with agencies, other states and media, Syrian state officials constructed Syrian sovereignty; the most frequently mentioned example is perhaps how Syrian ministers often portrayed Syria as a generous host to the refugees, in the face of the severe economic burden they presented.⁶ In this rhetoric, presented for example in April 2007 at a UNHCR-sponsored, international conference on Iraqi migration in Geneva, Syria was constructed as a distinct sovereign territory, with a government in control of population movements; Syrian sovereignty was also bolstered by the claims to goodness and generosity, which legitimise the existence of the state. Given Syria's recent status as a pariah and designated member of the axis-of-evil, the legitimising potential of Iraqi immigration was seized upon

⁵ Conversation with Iraqi woman, 11.02.2010

⁶ al-Miqdad, F. 2007, 'Iraqi Refugees in Syria', *Forced Migration Review*, Special Issue, June 2007.

to confirm Syria's acceptance by the international community as a sovereign state.⁷ The reason that this was possible lay in the exceptional status that migration is awarded within the sovereign ideal, which stipulates national homogeneity, stability of populations and exclusion of migrants.⁸ Somewhat ironically, Syria's weak application of this sovereign ideal allowed Syrian officials to point out Syrian generosity; in this way they portrayed the Syrian state's management of migration not as 'un-sovereign', but as a generous exception to the rule that Iraqi migrants should, if sovereignty were properly applied, be systematically excluded (even if this rule had never existed or applied to Iraqis in Syria).⁹ To quote from the paper presented at the above mentioned conference by the Syrian ministry of foreign affairs:

*"In the spring of 2003 the region witnessed the biggest exodus from Iraq to its neighbouring countries. The Syrian Arab Republic was one of the first countries targeted by this exodus. The Syrian government and people moved to offer a safe haven for the Iraqi brothers and sisters from different spectrums and social affiliations including children, women and elderly, who fled the destruction and dangers inflicted on them. Syria offered and is still offering those refugees all possible help and assistance necessitated by the ties of brotherhood and neighborliness (sic), despite the scarcity of material and financial potentials.(...)It is noteworthy that regulations in Syria do not require an entry visa for Arabs."*¹⁰

The quote demonstrates some of the key contradictions in the construction of Syrian sovereignty. On the one hand Syria is produced as a separate sovereign terrain through reference to its borders, government and people, on the other stress is put on the fact that 'Arabs' – a vague identity, incongruous with modern sovereignty – enjoy visa-free access to Syrian territory. Given the lack of detail however, overall, the image of Syria that emerges from this quote is that of a good, generous and

⁷ Rubin, B. 2007, *The Truth about Syria*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke; Schenker, D. October 2007, 'Syria's Role in Regional Destabilization: An American View', *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*.

⁸ Dauvergne, C. 2003, *Challenges to Sovereignty: Migration Laws for the 21st Century*, UNHCR, Geneva; Malkki, L.H. 1995, *Purity and exile : violence, memory and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago ; London; Soguk, N. & Whitehall, G. 1999, 'Wandering Grounds: Transversality, Identity, Territoriality and Movement', *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 675-98; Weber, C. 2010, 'Desert Designs: Design, Citizenship, and Political Acts of Citizenship With/Out Community', *Citizens without Community*, London; Hindess, B. 2005, 'Citizenship and Empire', in T.B. Hansen (ed.), *Sovereign bodies : citizens, migrants, and states in the postcolonial world*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, pp. 241 - 56.

⁹ These events show the enormous dominance of the sovereign-ideal paradigm, which meant that the world could only understand Syria's treatment of Iraqis (not in camps, not turned back at the border, not handed over to international humanitarian management) as a single, ad-hoc exception to Syrian sovereignty, rather than as a fundamentally different way of managing migration.

¹⁰ Syrian Arab Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2007, 'Paper presented by the Government of Syrian Arab Republic to the International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of the Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in the neighboring Countries', unpublished, page 2.

caring sovereign, in which government and people move in unison, happy to allow those living in the dangerous *outside* access to their secure and orderly *inside* territory – classic rhetorical, sovereignty-producing strategies.¹¹ The Syrian government officials who wrote the speech were demonstrably aware of the values and idealised social relations that are required from a good, liberal sovereign – even if the political reality within Syria did not correspond to these. The use of the term ‘refugees’, rather than ‘brothers’ or ‘guests’ is noteworthy, as it is a departure from standard Syrian government terminology and contains at least a degree of acceptance of the liberal, sovereign and humanitarian categorisations.¹²

Conclusion

The key argument of this paper concerns the research methods that are used in international relations, and the way the discipline considers reality and knowledge. Through rich, ethnographic, empirical evidence this paper demonstrates that sovereignty is a contingent form of social organization whose continued existence depends on bureaucratic routines, relationships and, indeed, physical structures. Sovereignty is thus a system of power that is constructed through human behaviour and human beliefs, which exist in a dynamic, interdependent connection. International relations scholars should move away from reifying key concepts of the discipline and turn towards investigating the context of these concepts’ historical development and continued existence. To argue that state sovereignty exists today in essentially the same manner as during Greek antiquity is, as I hope this paper shows, ludicrous. By investigating different aspects of sovereignty in the context of Iraqi migration to Syria, this paper shows that state sovereignty is not a monolithic set of rules that has existed throughout human history, but as dynamic and variable as the human agents who create it.

¹¹ Barnett, M. 1996, 'Sovereignty, nationalism, and regional order in the Arab state system', in T. Biersteker & C. Weber (eds), *State Sovereignty as Social Construct*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Duffield, M. 2002, 'Social Reconstruction and the Radicalization of Development: Aid as a Relation of Global Liberal Governance', *Development and Change*, vol. 33, pp. 1049-71;

¹² As the speech was presented at a UNHCR-sponsored conference and was an unprecedented opportunity to portray Syria’s generosity and consequent need for donor money, the adoption of the refugee rhetoric can be perhaps understood as tactical, nevertheless it is relevant that the Syrian ministry of foreign affairs decided on an accommodating, rather than defiant approach to the humanitarian community.