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Iraqi Migration to Syria: Political and Anthropological Perspectives

Panel description

Iraqi migration to Syria is many things. It is a discourse, a political development, a human tragedy and a funding opportunity. It is an individual and a collective experience, involving Iraqis, Syrians, state officials from around the world, humanitarian aid workers and researchers. It is a field covering as many physical locations as imaginary spaces, creating and breaking through material and ideational boundaries. Given the relative paucity of research on Syrian politics and society, Iraqi migration to this fascinating country also presents a field of rich and varied research opportunities, as this panel demonstrates. The three presentations all present an analysis of empirically deep and detailed fieldwork in Damascus, each offering a highly distinctive perspective and research focus on completely different aspects of Iraqi migration. In this way the panel also highlights the varying uses for ethnographic method, outside of its traditional applications in Anthropology.

By focusing on how Iraqis reached the decision to leave their home country, Ali Ali's paper addresses a crucial moment in the migration process, which factors determined flight, and how refugees remember their departure from exile. Through narrative methods, participants are encouraged to speak in their own style, facilitating personal reflection, which often emerges from apparently incoherent and ruptured stories. Tahir Zaman's analysis looks at the role of religion in the different stages of displacement, using as a case study the lives of Palestinian Iraqis in the Damascene suburb Yarmouk. The paper considers the religious networks, institutions and traditions mobilised by Palestinian Iraqis to create a distinctive geography of exile, and as a means of bolstering their welfare strategies. Finally, Sophia Hoffmann's paper analyses how the Syrian state is present in the lives of Iraqis in Damascus and what governance strategies the government uses to integrate Iraqis into the Syrian body politic. Arguing that Iraqis in Syria blur the boundaries between foreigner, refugee and citizens, the presentation argues that state 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.

Presentation 1: *Decision making in conditions of civil war*

Ali Ali, Centre for Narrative Research, UEL

Mass displacement in Iraq occurred on a national scale after the 2003 invasion, many left or were displaced internally. This paper examines patterns of exodus through the testimonies of Iraqis now living in Syria. We learn how they made momentous decisions to leave their homes and who was involved in such choices. Attention is drawn to how Iraqis addressed the extreme constraints associated with the conflict of post-invasion Iraq, one in which the state had collapsed after 13 years of corrosive international sanctions.

The paper argues that there is a strong connection between displacement, and state collapse and re-formation. Perceptions of threat to people's instrumental freedoms and capabilities in life, and not purely their material resources, need recognition. The invasion of Iraq has depleted the basic freedoms or capabilities of Iraqis, a direct result of the dismantling and re-formation of the Iraqi state, and the 'unmixing' of a pluralistic Iraqi society in the aftermath of sectarian civil war.

The paper's findings are based on around 20 in depth narrative interviews with Iraqis in Syria, of various socio-economic statuses, ages and genders. They address issues such as how Iraqis' lives and capabilities changed after 2003; about the perceptions of threat before flight; and if/ how consultations affected decision making. Narrative methods are used to encourage participants to speak in their own way, facilitating personal reflection, which often emerges from apparently incoherent and ruptured stories.

Presentation 2: *Religion as a cultural resource in the lives of Palestinian Iraqis in Damascus*

Tahir Zaman, Centre for Research on Migration, Refugees and Belonging, UEL

This paper addresses the paucity of research on the role of religion in the various phases of the refugee process, by examining the forced displacement of Palestinian Iraqis from Baghdad to Damascus. The Palestinian Iraqis represent a singularly interesting case, as forced displacement has been a defining issue in their lives from the very beginning; as their parents and/or grandparents were displaced from Palestine in 1948.

Via an analysis of refugee narratives gathered over a six month period at the Palestinian Iraqi Community Centre in Yarmouk, a suburb of Damascus, this paper reveals the dynamics of the refugee process in relation to the religious lives of forced migrants. In addition, the paper considers to what extent religious networks, institutions and traditions are mobilised by Palestinian Iraqis to create a distinctive geography of exile, and as a means of bolstering their welfare strategies. Yarmouk provides the context in which social relations unfold and where identity and space is renegotiated by Palestinian Iraqi refugees.

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

Sophia Hoffmann, Department for Politics and International Studies, SOAS

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.

The recent opening of Syria to humanitarian organisation since 2007, linked to Iraqi migration, has had a transformative effect of how Syrian sovereignty is exercised. The emergence of Iraqi migration as an issue of humanitarian concern has developed a platform on which Syrian sovereignty can be performed, at conferences, the UN and through cooperation with NGOs and UN agencies. While humanitarian practices thus alter the possibilities of action for the Syrian state, the transformative effect

is not unidirectional. Humanitarian actors are visibly affected by Syrian government demands and by the government's management and discourse of Iraqis.