

Engendering refugees' livelihood strategies: the case of the Iraqi diaspora in Damascus

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Abstract

This study looks at the gender dimension in Iraqis' livelihood strategies in Syria in the period immediately before the present uprising and repression. It suggests that the lack of resources in Syria has meant that Iraqis have 'activated' resources elsewhere, outside Syria and outside the environment of institutional humanitarian assistance, and examines the implications of these transnational practices for Iraqi families and their networks. In the first part of this paper I analyse the characteristics of the host country, starting from the urban milieu in which the refugee communities are situated. I note the relative unimportance of ethnic and sectarian affiliation within the Iraqi diaspora in Syria, and focus on the more significant social and economic constraints on recent refugees following the enforcement by the Syrian government of stricter regulations on entry and stay, and the subsequent separation of families between Iraq and Syria. In the second part I examine the dependence of Iraqi refugees in Syria on family networks to cope with the restrictive measures of the host country on the one hand, and with the conflict in Iraq on the other, in order to comprehend how gender in the Iraqi diaspora in Syria constitutes a determining element with respect to livelihood strategies.

Introduction

Since 2003 debate has grown among both practitioners and academics on urban displacement and gender in the Iraqi diaspora. On the one hand, the urban character of displacement – and the inherent higher mobility of the displaced – were a subject of study for their fluid and elusive nature, which posed important challenges to the provision of humanitarian assistance (Chatelard 2010). On the other hand, the gender dimension of displacement has been predominantly examined in relation to the vulnerabilities of Iraqi refugees, notably Iraqi women and girls.

If read through a positive lens, the relation between 'mobility' and 'gender' – as opposed to 'urban displacement' and 'vulnerabilities' – may be conducive to the constitution of livelihood strategies. In other words, mobility – to be

understood as the circulation of people, representations, ideas, goods and services across and within national boundaries (Dahinden 2010) – may enhance social resilience and capabilities, as it could represent an opportunity to diversify resources while involving women and leading to 'new gender roles' (Loughry 2008).

To access these resources, refugees often rely on family members and friends in the areas of origin and destination through a complex series of interpersonal relationships that constitutes a transnational network. Family ties are commonly the primary link between these constellations of individuals (Massey 1988). Transnational family networks are among the most frequent means among displaced people to mobilise financial resources, such as remittances, as well as the

social capital and the information used to enable trade and relocation between the country of asylum, the homeland, and third destinations. Iraqi women and men may have different roles in accessing these networks, a difference that challenges institutional humanitarian assistance and policies as well as customary patriarchal hierarchies and structures.

There is growing evidence that transnational livelihood strategies through family networks – including remittance sending as well as knowledge-sharing – may be equally relevant in situations of forced displacement as they are in situations of economic migration (Horst 2004). It is a distinctive feature of Iraqi forced migration in Syria that economic constraints in the country of asylum mean that remittances are sent from the country of origin, opposite to the usual trend of sending remittances from the country of asylum to the country of origin (Doraï 2007).

Following an overview of livelihood terminology and some relevant definitions, I intend to examine how gender has influenced transnational livelihood strategies among Iraqis who took refuge in Syria, whether the lack of resources in Syria has led to the need to ‘activate’ resources elsewhere outside Syria and outside the environment of the regime of humanitarian assistance, and how gender might be important in such an attempt to retrieve available resources.

The Iraqi diaspora in Syria, especially since the fall of Ba’thist regime, has been characterised by a high level of freedom of choice in the place of settlement, with three out of four refugees living amongst the civilian population in the country of asylum. In 2005 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) calculated that 10.6 million Iraqis were living amongst the local population, compared to the 3.6 million Iraqis living in refugee camps or centres (UNHCR 2005). Despite stricter entry measures adopted by the Syrian government in 2007, the absence of camps implies a relative increase in decision-making for refugees, which in turn allows us to reflect on the variables which determine their movements. Gender is an important variable alongside ethnic and sectarian affiliation (Al-Ali 2007). In contrast to the situation before 2003, most Iraqi refugees

registered by the UNHCR in Syria are Sunnis. On the other hand, demographic data collected by UNHCR show that in Syria females constitute half of the refugee population, with female-headed households making up 30% of the cases (UNHCR 2008). Field research conducted in Syria and in Iraq suggests that ethno-sectarian divisions and family structures that shaped life in the country of origin have undergone changes in the diasporic context. Despite patriarchal opposition, women seem to play a determining role in anchoring family members in the recent diaspora and provide livelihoods through family networks.

Despite being one of the largest refugee producing countries, until recently Syria used to host the majority of displaced Iraqis in the region. While Syria is experiencing its own crisis, the Iraqi displacement situation is far from being solved. By relying on the participant observation research method, this paper seeks to provide new ways of understanding the conditions of the Iraqi displacement and possible solutions to it. This research was, however, undertaken in the period before the current instability in Syria. Any short or long-term solution to the Iraqi refugee situation needs to be read in light of other displacement situations in the region, which now includes thousands of displaced Syrians.

A note on terminology

Livelihoods are defined by Chambers and Conway (1992) as comprising ‘capabilities, assets – including both material and social resources – and activities required for a means of living.’ This definition is widely accepted in the discipline of economics and development studies. For the scope of this paper, however, Jacobsen’s definition of livelihoods in situations of displacement may provide a better framework (Jacobsen 2002). As she argues, the pursuit of livelihoods in the context of forced displacement encompasses ‘how people access and mobilize resources enabling [refugees] to increase their economic security, thereby reducing the vulnerability created and exacerbated by conflict.’ While displacement can result in new forms of gender and age vulnerability, it can also lead to the creation of new strategies to access and mobilise these resources, with

new forms of social organisation and networks forming as a result of having to cope with different hardships related to forced displacement. Within this context, refugee men and women may use different means to access resources and pursue livelihood activities, actively navigating the opportunities and constraints of their social worlds. To qualify for assistance from humanitarian organisations, however, women might be pushed to adopt identities such as 'single mothers' or 'women at risk'. In reality, women's statuses might be more complex, as their spouses might be residing in another location with the knowledge of the woman (Gale 2006). A single woman with children in Damascus who fits in the vulnerable category might have a husband in Iraq who supports the family via remittances. In each case the woman would be termed 'vulnerable', but her situation would clearly vary, depending on the resources available to her, including those from diasporic family members. Old hierarchies of authority may also be challenged in the refugee context with significant implications for men's roles as husbands, fathers, protectors and breadwinners, along with their loss of formal power networks. Gale's approach may call into question conventionally applied categories of vulnerabilities and open up possibilities for a more nuanced understanding of the situation in which refugees find themselves.

As illustrated in the cases examined below, vulnerability should thus be analysed as a dynamic concept intended to capture households' ability to respond to perturbations or shocks. At different stages of the displacement cycle, the capacity to cope with shocks may vary along with the extent and degree of refugees' vulnerabilities. Diverse sources of income – for instance, through different income earners in Iraq and Syria – are an important basis for refugee families to pursue livelihood security. The existence or lack of such income sources is in turn a key predictor of vulnerability. However, cash income is not sufficient to ensure livelihood security. This is most evident when refugees are forced to rely on negative coping mechanisms such as child labour and trafficking, two aspects that result from and contribute to the vulnerability of refugees.

A note on methodology

This study is the result of field research conducted from 2007 to 2011 thanks to the support of the UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration, and Intersos, an international non-governmental organisation. The analysis – ethnographic in nature – is based on 45 semi-structured interviews, including 29 with refugees and asylum-seekers, 12 refugee returnees, and three displaced Iraqis who were not registered with UNHCR. The interviews were conducted in Damascus at the UNHCR registration centre in Duma as well as in the refugees' houses. Interviews with returnees were conducted in Baghdad and Basrah, mainly at the NGO's premises. Three follow-up interviews were also conducted via phone. In addition to semi-formal interviews, I used participant observation as a research tool throughout my engagement with the Iraqi refugee community over several years. Additional quantitative data were extracted from the two surveys conducted by Ipsos in 2007 and the 2005 assessment by the UNHCR–United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) World Food Program, as well as various UNHCR polls conducted at the border and in Baghdad in 2010. The persons interviewed include persons coming from higher and lower socio-economic backgrounds according to their previous employment in Iraq. Questions regarding the faith of the interviewees were left as optional, in order to avoid further stigmatisation of this element, which is a frequent ground for fleeing the place of origin (Jacobsen and Landau 2003).

The perception of refugee women was limited by the western origin and the male gender of the author. Not all refugee women were alone during the interview but were instead accompanied by male relatives who may have influenced the answers given during the interviews. On the other hand, interviews with male adults were favoured by a higher level of intimacy, and at all times, trustworthiness was communicated and the informed consent of the respondents was asked before starting any interview.

The interviews were conducted in Arabic directly by the author. Avoiding the use of interpreters favoured trust-building as the inter-

viewees – whether males or females – may feel ashamed speaking or more embarrassed to talk about stigmatising subjects that are proscribed in their culture in front of someone from the same culture and instilled with the same moral codes. Respect and sensitivity in communicating with the respondents were of paramount importance to minimise cross-cultural tensions.

To reduce the risk of bias, interviews were also conducted outside the institutional milieu, drawing on different clusters of interviewees, including both UNHCR-registered and non-registered Iraqis, as well as aid organisations and shop keepers from the host community, thus minimising the faults of the snowball approach and the accumulation of information based on only one source of information. To diversify clusters, interviewees were also selected in Iraq for referrals to diaspora members residing in Damascus. The numbers of respondents in the country of origin were, however, limited due to security constraints.

Distribution of the Iraqi population in Damascus: a reflection of continuity

Urbanization of the diaspora and chain migration

Exile –consists first of an uprooting followed by a process of reterritorialisation. This reinsertion into a new context may generate a special meaning for the exiles. Within Iraq, the post-2003 uprooting resulted in the division of the territory on an ethno-sectarian basis. By way of contrast, displacement to locations outside Iraq led to the creation of a new and diverse social setting (Cambrezy 2001). In Syria, as in Jordan, Iraqi refugees do not reside in camps, but amongst the local population in rural areas and particularly in urban areas; hence the separate definitions of urban refugees and rural refugees. The notion of urban refugees stems from an increasingly recurrent global phenomenon characterised by a decline in the use of refugee camps, of which Damascus is an emblematic example. The decreased use of refugee camps has provided researchers with the chance to observe the paths of a diaspora within a host territory, as refugees are not subject to the limits of move-

ment represented by camps (Al-Sharmani 2003; Grabska 2006). Moreover, the absence of camps implies an increase in the decision-making process for refugees, and allows us to reflect on the variables which determine their movements. The following section will examine some areas in Damascus where a higher concentration of Iraqis was found and will then provide an analysis the modalities of settling employed by the Iraqi community in exile.

Based on the available information, it appears that Damascus is the preferred destination for the majority of Iraqis: over 50% of Iraqi refugees have settled here since the beginning of 2007. Most Iraqis in Damascus originate from Baghdad; the number of Baghdadi Iraqis in this city rose from over 50% in May 2007 to 78% in November of the same year (IPSOS November 2007). Thus, this is a migratory track from and to the largest urban centres in the countries of origin and destination. This tendency remained unchanged until 2012 (UNHCR 2012). Iraqis chose Damascus as their destination initially for the lower costs of living compared to Amman (UNHCR 2006), but later this does not seem to have been the reason for the decision: In 2007, just 3.7% of refugees decided to reside in Damascus on the basis of its lower costs (Ipsos May 2007). The increased costs with an inflation rate which reached 10% in the same year partly explain this change in decision-making. However, many Iraqis continued to choose Damascus as their destination. In the second half of 2007, over 55% of refugees claimed that they chose Damascus primarily because of the presence of parents and/or friends (Ipsos November 2007). As Haifa, a mother of 5, put it:

We arrived here [in Damascus] because my brother-in-law, who has been living in Jaramana since 2005. He bought a house here. When I arrived, he helped me to settle me and my children and I've now rented a house nearby his place.

The Syrian capital remained the major centre of attraction despite the considerable increase in prices. The major pull factor – the initial low cost of living – was replaced by bonds of family and friendship, a phenomenon known as chain migration.

The major concentrations of Iraqis were in the peripheral areas of the capital, mainly in the quarters of Sayyida Zaynab, Jaramana, Qud-saiyya, Yarmuk and Masakin Berzeh (Ipsos May 2007). When one takes the history of these areas into consideration, some interesting details emerge. Often these quarters were the same sites where previous generations of Iraqi refugees had settled. One of the largest concentrations is found in Sayyida Zaynab. A Shiite Iraqi community started to settle here in 1970 and 1980, when individuals were deported because of their alleged Iranian origins (Babakhan 1996). Sayyida Zaynab is one of the major pilgrimage centres of the Imamite Shiite community. Thousands of people pay a visit (*ziarah*) to this site where the daughter of Imam Ali Ibn Abu Talib is said to be buried (Mervin 1996). Today Sayyida Zaynab is important not only as a pilgrimage centre, but also for being one of the centres of the exiled Iraqi community. Shiites as well Sunnis live in this area. The original Shiite character of this quarter and the presence of an equal number of Sunnis confirm that sectarian differences do not necessarily determine where Iraqis decide to settle, even though those who took refuge in Syria were escaping from the sectarian violence which was dividing Iraq. As Khadija explained:

We fled from the sectarian violence [*taifiya*] in November 2007. I settled in Sayyida Zaynab because here I had some friends who had fled Baghdad for the same reason.

The Iraqis living in Syria are often well-educated and previously belonged to the middle class. Before the fall of Saddam Hussein, Khadija used to work together with her husband in the Ministry of Culture. Because such Iraqi refugees are themselves the victims of sectarian conflict, they are unlikely to cause a spill-over of the conflict in the country of asylum (Leenders 2008). The high presence of 'mixed' heads of households among Iraqi refugees, i.e. belonging to both sects, corroborates this thesis.

Muhammad, a Sunni Arab, is married to Jwana K., a Sunni Kurd woman. Like many other interviewees, he had initially hesitated to mention his ethnic and religious affiliation. In fact, 69% of the

people interviewed by UNHCR in a recent survey refused to specify their faith – saying simply that they were Muslims. Such a trend may be the result of the stigmatisation of their affiliation.

I don't understand why they need to keep asking if I am Arab, Kurd, Shiite or Sunni!? I am Muslim and I am Iraqi. I already had to pass through this in Baghdad. So why they keep asking me?

Secondary moves by Iraqi families within Damascus suburbs and rural areas were also observed. These seem to be dictated by the financial constraints faced by Iraqis who initially relied on savings and saw their depletion in the face of high inflation. Muhammad continues:

We had to move from Masakin Berzeh to Yarmuk because we could no longer afford the price of living in Masakin Berzeh. The apartments there are way more expensive.

New patterns also appeared after the intensification of violence in Syria following the unrest of March 2011. Since then many Iraqis have been secondarily displaced from conflict-affected areas like Idlib, Homs, Hama, Aleppo and Dar'a, while others who used to live on the outskirts of Damascus, most notably in Sayida Zaynab, Harasta, Arbeen, Barza and Duma, had to relocate to safer areas within the city – particularly Jaramana, where an increasing number of internally displaced Syrians also converged.

As pointed out by Lassailly-Jacob (1996): 'Contrary to widespread stereotypes, the first groups of refugees are not fleeing randomly, but they follow familiar routes.' Lassailly-Jacob's research confirmed that, after the fall of the Ba'ath regime, the Iraqi diaspora has followed migration patterns similar to those of the pre-2003 diaspora, despite the considerable change in the sectarian composition of the refugee population. Ties of kinship or friendship, as well as economic and security factors, significantly contributed to the continuity of this migration process, and prevailed over sectarian differences.

At the same time, the higher mobility of exiled women in the new urban context was often found to exacerbate the anxieties of their husbands, who remained rooted in their traditional

patriarchal views. For displaced Iraqi women, the experience of conflict as well as the hardships posed by their exile and refugee status often introduces a new structure of opportunity and constraints into a changing social, political, and economic landscape.

The dispersal of family members

Syria has not ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, nor its Protocol. The government allowed the entry of Iraqis, adopting a relatively open borders policy until October 1st 2007, when it decided to limit access to Iraqis, blaming the illegitimate war led by the United States and the negative repercussions on Syria resulting from the large presence of Iraqis (Saleh 2007). With the closure of the border, family members were separated between Iraq and Syria. When interviewed, Basima, a young married woman from Baghdad who lived with her older son in Sayyida Zaynab, had been separated from the rest of the family in Iraq.

My husband had registered with UNHCR in Damascus, but then he had to return to Iraq for work and now he cannot leave the country. Every once in a while I manage to talk to him via phone. He had tried to get a visa from the Syrian embassy to return to Damascus, but it's so hard.

Nevertheless, growing numbers of family members decide to take the risk of returning to Iraq with no guarantee of being allowed to re-enter the country. The Syrian government later softened these entry measures by allowing a limited number of Iraqis to obtain a visa at the border. Despite this change, surveys indicate that only in 63% of cases is the composition of the family unit the same as prior to departure from Iraq (Ipsos 2007).

The reasons that push Iraqi refugees to return home vary. For instance, Zaynab, who lost her husband when he was assassinated in his police car, claimed:

I want to go back to Baghdad together with my daughter Hala, to look for my son who has been kidnapped.

The risk of not being able to return to Syria did not prevent her from going to look for her son.

In a phone conversation a month later, Zaynab explained:

I had to go back but I could not find my son. Now we are stranded here in Baghdad and we cannot go back to Syria because we do not have a visa.

The largest proportion of returns has been dictated by the socio-economic constraints the refugees faced in Syria (UNHCR 2010). As *duiyuf*, or 'guests', Iraqis in Syria are not allowed to work. In order to have access to regular employment, it is necessary to have a work permit, which is obtainable when a long-term residency permit (*iqamah*) is issued. The latter may be very difficult for Iraqi refugees to obtain, thus limiting access to work.

Syrian authorities have generally tolerated the irregular staying of Iraqis. Nevertheless, they posed severe limitations on access to the formal labour market. In addition, Iraqi employees are vulnerable to regulations that withdraw their work permits if they are found to have committed offensive acts in respect to *šaraf* (honor) and *adab* (decency). These acts are considered crimes (*jinayah*) and reporting them to the authorities is entirely at the discretion of the employer (Saleh 2007). The considerable competitiveness to find employment – most notably in the informal labour market – further reduces refugees' chances of obtaining work with decent wages.

As a result, Iraqis are left with few options but to rely on their savings: These constitute the primary form of support for 41% of refugees (Ipsos May 2007). The high cost of rent together with the lack of earned income can soon exhaust savings, leaving no alternative but to seek resources in Iraq (UNHCR May and December 2010). The case of Muntadhar, who had spent over a year in Damascus with his family without finding employment, is emblematic:

Since we left Baghdad because of the threats of the Shiite militias, we've lived in Damascus only thanks to our savings. In Baghdad I used to work as a taxi driver, while in Syria I had to spend most of my time at home. My wife Noora obtained her residency permit only thanks to her mother who is Syrian.

Muntadhar is despondent that he can no longer fulfil his role as breadwinner. He used to have stable employment before he was forced to leave Baghdad, together with his family. Pushed by the lack of work opportunities, he decided to go back to Baghdad, where he now works and occasionally sends remittances to his wife and children.

Despite the regulations which limit their mobility, Iraqis manage to find ways to return, for example, by renewing their residency permits prior to return to Iraq. Muhammad explained:

I cross the border periodically; I verify the situation and the conditions of our goods in Al-Mansour, Baghdad. We've rented out our place there, and the rent is our major source of income in Syria. I still try to go back as little as possible. There are too many risks and threats as we've first experienced fleeing Baghdad.

As a mixed family, Jwana and Muhammad had to move to Syria in order to save their lives and to preserve their family unit. However, the division of their family, and the temporary return to Iraq of some of the family members, is now the only way left to compensate the lack of resources in Syria.

Livelihood strategies and the feminisation of the diaspora

De-constructing family networks

For many Iraqis, the solidarity between community and family members is one of the few ways of coping with the lack of financial resources. At the beginning of 2007, 86% of those Iraqis who received assistance did so from family members, most notably through family networks (Ipsos 2007). When Syria introduced stricter border regulations, there was a radical change in the way that family networks operated, with remittances to the Iraqi refugees coming mostly from Iraq. Refugees' perceptions of threats to physical security, together with Syria's adoption of stricter border regulations, have led to a gendered dispersal of the family unit, with a new structure emerging in order to foster means of activating resources. The majority of family members who decided to stay in Iraq are male adults, while the children and the wives tended to anchor in Syria. This trend is corroborated by data col-

lected by UNHCR (UNHCR 2008). As Muhammad explained:

Reluctantly I had to leave my wife in Damascus together with my children, while I've returned here [to Baghdad] to check on our properties and try to gain a living. I could not let my woman and children live here. Here in Baghdad there is no future for my family.

Even though the risks associated with return remains high, men often shuttle between Iraq and Syria to preserve the 'duty' – as Muhammad puts it – of the head of the family:

When I go back to my family [in Damascus] I bring the money I earn with me; otherwise I send them to my wife through hawalat bankiya [bank transfers]. It is not much but it is vital for them to keep living there.

Family networks, commonly known to be a channel to send remittances from the country of asylum to family members in the country of origin, thus tend to be upset by the livelihood constraints in Syria. Iraqi husbands who are unable to find resources in Syria decide to look for them back in Iraq, and are thus temporarily separated from their wives and families who remain in the country of asylum. As illustrated in the cases above, the migration of displaced Iraqis is often circular across a wide area, as a result of a strategy of managing risks through the dispersal of family members along family networks and gender lines.

Resettlement and family reunification

Although few Iraqis are said to benefit from humanitarian assistance, the referral mechanism for resettlement managed by UNHCR does have a significant influence on the livelihood strategies of refugees. UNHCR uses measures based on positive discrimination in identifying those who are eligible: Women at risk and female-headed households are amongst the most vulnerable categories according to UNHCR and therefore the most likely to be referred for resettlement to a third country when no alternative solutions are available (UNHCR 2010). The number of resettled Iraqis from the Middle East to industrialised countries rose from a few hundred in 2006

to approximately 50,000 in 2010 (UNHCR 2010). The vast majority was resettled to the USA. In Syria the numbers of admissions to the USA declined in the following years because foreign state officials found it impossible to process the refugees' claims.

From May 2007 to December 2012, 10,784 Iraqi female refugees arrived in the USA from Syria, thus representing over 52% of resettled refugees by sex. Following the criterion that single women and women at risk are more likely to be resettled to third countries, Iraqi women often choose to separate from their husbands in Syria in order to be considered for such resettlement. Living in a transitional situation defined as a 'limbo' (Danış 2007), Iraqis have high expectations of asylum in third countries. 27% of Iraqis surveyed by Ipsos claim that resettlement is the only reason they want to register with UNHCR, as in the case of Umm Husseyn, an elderly Shiite woman who resides in Sayyida Zaynab:

I fled the quarter of Salama [previously known as Mintaqat Saddam] because a Sunni armed group persecuted me. I've then moved to Qamariyyah together with my daughters who are married to Sunni husbands. I've managed to come to Syria but my daughters had to stay in Iraq because they had problems with their passports. I do not want to go back to Iraq, and neither do I want to stay here. I want to start a new life in Ireland as a human being with dignified life, without having to go to the Suq and seeing dead bodies on the streets.

Although growing numbers of Iraqis have managed to depart for resettlement, the majority of refugees have to wait up to a year before their cases are processed by the resettlement countries. Pending resettlement screening, many Iraqis are unable to secure the resources needed to cope with their increasingly precarious situations in Damascus. At the same time, Iraqis who attempt to return are disqualified from obtaining refugee status and resettlement to a third country (Chatty and Mansour 2012). Hence a high proportion of Iraqi families anchor in Syria to secure the processing of their cases, while other families decide to split along gender lines between Syria and the home country.

Bearing in mind UNHCR's policies on resettlement, many Iraqi women decide to remain in Syria to secure their departure from Syria to third host countries, while husbands go back and forth from Syria to increase access to resources (Reliefweb 2012). Once the women are resettled, Iraqi men, as well as other family members, may try to join them in a subsequent step. Family reunification is promoted by UNHCR according to the right of a family to live together. In 2009, 6,122 women who were identified by UNHCR as at risk were admitted for resettlement in various hosting countries, while 922 followed for family reunification (UNHCR 2010). The US, the major resettlement country in the world, issued a special priority procedure to allow refugee family members to reunite with their Iraqi relatives in the USA. As with movement from Iraq to Syria, chain migration from Syria to industrialised countries was found to be a decisive factor to pull Iraqis across remarkably different gender lines.

Forced marriage and trafficking

Although its actual magnitude is unknown, arranged marriage is another frequent method used by Iraqi women to foster mobility and access to resources. This is particularly evident in the Arab world, where the relevant regulations about polygamy are less restrictive than in Europe. Such a marriage may be the decision of either the male or the female head of the family. An example was given by Fatima, the mother of Rana. Fatima moved to Damascus following the wedding of her daughter to a Syrian man. The mother declared:

With considerable efforts, I've managed to give my daughter in marriage to Husseyn. I did it in her interest after my husband died of cancer last year [2006]. Now, Rana tries to take care of me.

Family networks are often at the core of these transnational cross-border strategies, to enable access from a first to a second country of asylum. For example, in her interview, Aisha, who lived in Baghdad alone to complete her studies before joining the rest of her family in Syria, confessed

to be eager to marry her cousin in Canada. The degree of coercion in these situations often varies and may be subtle.

A frequent and serious phenomenon – although more often unreported – is represented by the trafficking of women for prostitution. This may be managed by criminal organisations, however, family networks are also a pathway for sexual exploitation (USDS 2011). Despite being officially prohibited, prostitution is often condoned by local authorities with a *rešwa*, or bribe. Young women are invited to Syria by their relatives and offered employment, but are then coerced to work in brothels. A typical case is that of Rizan, who was married when she was still 16 to Ahmad, a Sunni man:

After the escalation of violence in 2006, my son and I fled to Syria to my husband with forged passports. Once we finished our savings, my husband decided to use our place as a brothel. Ahmad was running the business together with a Syrian guy; he forced Iraqi women into prostitution, while we resided in the same apartment. When I tried to convince him to leave this activity, he beat me. So I left him and I returned here in Al-Maqal [Basrah], where I live with my parents.

The Syrian authorities are often silent about these episodes, but not always. Women accused of prostitution in Damascus can be deported to Iraq, with serious threats to their physical safety. Although the actual scale of trafficking in women and girls is unknown, this phenomenon – together with arranged marriages – certainly represents a common cross-border strategy for Iraqis in Syria. Negative coping strategies become more frequent when few other options are available in a protracted situation. Exploitative sexual relationships were found to be more wide-spread among the poorest segments of the refugee population, who are often the ones who have fewer means to survive. The cases examined reveal a consensus among women and youths that selling sexual favours, whether formally for cash or on the basis of a kind of patronage, is a function dictated by unequal power relationships and lack of alternative prospects.

Education and Residence

Since the 2003 war, Syria is the only country in the region which has provided access to basic services to Iraqis, including access to primary health care as well as to primary and secondary education. Registration at school is one of the few solutions left to obtain a residency permit in Syria. An example is a family of five. In Baghdad, the father used to be the director of a business, while the mother was a ministerial employee. The father was threatened, but the police did nothing, so the family fled to Damascus, and now live in Mašru' Dummar. The parents obtained a residence permit thanks to one of their daughters, who has enrolled in school in Damascus. Because enrolling in Syrian schools is a means to obtain the residency permit, the highest peaks of refugee arrivals in Syria coincide with the beginning of the academic year (UNHCR 2010). According to the Syrian Ministry of Education, only 26,124 Iraqis are enrolled in schools, equivalent to 13.5% of the Iraqi population in Syria aged between 6 and 14 years (Williams 2007). This may be because not all families were initially aware of the possibility to enrol children in school. Often the credits acquired in Iraqi schools were not recognised by Syrian schools, as they have different educational curricula, and frequently school certificates had been left in Iraq. Moreover, formal access to education does not imply actual attendance at school. According to the same source (Williams 2007), the majority of Iraqis dropped out of school after the first month of the academic year, mostly because of economic constraints. According to a 16-year-old who now lives in Damascus together with his mother and his younger sister in a flat in Sayyidah Zeynab:

I used to go to school but the Syrian shebab [kids] always looked for trouble. My mother does not earn enough money to make a living. Then I went to work in a factory where they produce gasoline heaters. I used to earn 200 lira a day [4 USD] working 12 hours. The owner of the work then fired me saying I was Iraqi. My father is still in Iraq with the family of his second wife. So I had to help my mother to find a living, otherwise we won't pay the rent.

Although the parents in Iraqi refugee families are often well educated, work by minors is in fact common. With average wages of only 50 lira [1 USD] per day, children are generally exposed to work exploitation. The opportunity to complete their education is not in fact taken up once the residency permit is obtained. Isolated from the local communities, Iraqi children are thus left with their mothers to find a living. Girls are often left at home to take care of their younger siblings, whilst the mothers may have occasional work as maids. According to Iraqi women, authorities may close an eye when sons are found to be working, but the authorities do not tolerate their husbands working without the work permit. On the other hand, most well-off families expressed anxieties in letting their children go to school, fearing that the school's environment may not be safe and that their children may be victims of bullying.

Redesigning the family structure

Often forced to leave Iraq for Syria without their husbands, Iraqi women find themselves taking on unprecedented roles. Abdallah, a former aeronautical engineer and Ba'ath member who graduated from university in Paris, now suffers from senile dementia. His wife Fatima and her daughter take care of him. While I conducted the interview, Abdallah pretended to be interviewed instead of his wife, and asked the reason why the questions were not addressed to him. The elderly man needed medical treatment. At that time, the family was living from their savings and from the money they had managed to earn by selling their assets in Baghdad. The wife and daughter faced an uncertain future that would require paid employment by one or both of them, as they were no longer able to count on Abdallah's work.

While women become the main wage-earners in the refugee context, men often suffer from the loss of role and authority, which becomes evident in feelings of frustration. This primarily stems from an evolving role of women in the mobilisation of resources through a higher degree of autonomy. The latter includes the involvement of Iraqi females not only in generating income,

but also in increased freedom of movement. This may cause resentment among male adults and lead to acts of domestic violence against their wives and daughters. Such episodes of gender-based violence are likely to go unreported.

In the essentially patriarchal structure of Iraqi families, the male head of the household often withholds the passports of the other family members. The difficult circumstances of exile in Syria, however, challenge such traditional behaviour, as does the process for accessing asylum. UNHCR's procedures for registration require that the asylum-seeker be present at the interview, even though it usually takes place several months after the first appointment with the UN Refugee Agency. While male heads of the families often have to go back and forth between Iraq and Syria, the women settle more permanently in Syria, and can register with UNHCR Syria as asylum-seekers and follow the procedures required to obtain the refugee certificate. Leaving women alone in Syria stimulates male anxiety about perceived threats to female modesty and sexuality. This is significant in the case of Mustafa, who lost the chance to register as refugee because he was going back and forth between Syria to Iraq:

When we first approached the UNHCR, I applied for the interview under my name. I knew I would have had to go back to Baghdad – but you know – I could not let my wife to do the interview alone before the UNHCR. My wife is a simple woman. Alone she could not have done the registration. On the other hand I had to go back to come back here [to Baghdad] because it is the only place where I could find work.

In the end, neither Mustafa nor his wife registered with UNHCR. Mustafa stays in Baghdad to work and only occasionally manages to visit his wife and children, while his wife renewed her residency only thanks to her children's enrolment in school. However, not showing up at the UNHCR interview and the subsequent lack of registration means losing the opportunity to obtain refugee status. For this reason, a large proportion of men have had to renounce their exercise of monopolistic control over the rest of the family, leaving female family members to take on new roles and deal with authorities to ensure the fam-

ily's future. As observed by Özyeğin: 'Patriarchal opposition to women's waged work, rooted in deep-seated anxieties about perceived threats to female sexuality and modesty and to men's honour, drastically limits the sort of work women can perform and the contexts in which they can work' (Özyeğin 2001). However, the severe limitations following exile have introduced a radical change in the involvement of Iraqi women in access to resources (Danış 2007). During the interview, Khadija explained how her husband, who used to be a sergeant until the fall of Saddam Hussein, is now unemployed in Syria:

We are here [before the UNHCR registration centre] looking for treatment. My husband has got a problem... He drinks too much. Now I try to gain a wage working as a carer in a Syrian family. Though, I can't take care of my children who are just 7 and 10 years old.

A large number of women, who prior to displacement belonged to the Iraqi middle class, today work in the informal labour market in Syria. While only those with sufficient financial resources manage to flee Iraq, over half of UNHCR-registered Iraqi refugees have now been in Syria for over five years, and their progressive destitution is continuing because of the depletion of their savings, the lack of stable income, and the high level of inflation affecting the country of asylum.

As a result, even the most well-off families were pushed to undertake unskilled work in the informal labour market. Marie, a 50-year old Iraqi woman, provides an example of this recurrent phenomenon. She claimed:

I am an artist. In Baghdad I used to do taškil zinai [plastic arts]. I now live in Masakin Barzeh, in Damascus' outskirts. I left my place in Al-Mansur at the beginning of 2007: my 18-year-old son speaks English well, so he followed a British company in Basrah to find employment. Together with a couple of friends he was instead kidnapped by the militias. His friends' parents phoned me to inform me that the militias had requested a 20,000 USD ransom to release them. We paid and then moved to Sulaymaniyya [Northern Iraq] together with my second son. We lived there for a while and then I left to Syria while my two sons were stranded in Habbur between Turkey and Iraq, and eventually

had joined me here in Damascus. Here I sometimes work as a cleaner for Syrian families, and I volunteer to decorate the church, but it is not enough and I am now finishing my savings.

The remittances and other assets sent by Iraqi men are irregular and insufficient to secure the livelihoods of their families. Thus most of the women interviewed – from different socio-economic backgrounds – undertake different kinds of labour, mostly low-skilled casual work for modest wages, while their children are also often compelled to find supplementary sources of income. The previous gender- and age-based roles of family members have therefore been transformed as a result of the conditions in exile.

Conclusions

Through the process of chain migration, the recent Iraqi diaspora followed pre-2003 patterns, characterised by solidarity networks made up of family ties rather than ethno-sectarian elements. At one level, therefore, the diaspora is marked by continuity. However, socio-economic constraints in Syria and the subsequent adoption of stricter entry regulations by the Syrian government in 2007 greatly influenced Iraqis' livelihood strategies and led to considerable changes to the roles of men and women. The cases here examined show how Iraqis adapted to the norms which regulate their mobility – registration and resettlement criteria, family reunification, and access to education – in order to activate different resources.

Gender was found to be a critical factor in determining who moves, how those moves take place, and the resultant ability of displaced women and families to access available resources after the division-of the family unit (Boyd and Grieco 2003). The redirection of remittances from Iraq to Syria implied an increasing devolution of authority to women as heads of households who channelled resources and developed some local ties, thereby allowing male family members to stay mobile.

As pointed out by Chatelard, breadwinners are ready to take some degree of risk to look for work, but access to work and other services may still be too risky for other household members

(Chatelard 2010). Pushed by their traditional role to comply with this duty, male heads of the households tend to undertake such risks. Despite the reluctance of their husbands, wives are subsequently anchored in the host country together with their children. Such cases illustrate a challenge to the traditional family structure because of their conflict with its patriarchal character. Such a change – which often affects wealthy as well as poorer families – should not be romanticised. These alterations appear to be disruptions rather than positive evolutions. In fact, women are often forced to undertake roles which are far from emancipation, but are rather the result of social exclusion. What the long-term consequences of such a redesign of family roles will be – for example, whether the displacement will become an opportunity leading to women's empowerment – remains to be seen.

All too often humanitarian organisations have viewed freedom of movement only as a challenge in terms of reaching those needing their assistance. However, freedom of movement, including cross-border movements between and within the country of asylum and the country of

origin, is also an international human right and a means for the displaced to access resources. Institutional humanitarian assistance should build upon this by supporting community-based projects aimed at enhancing these capabilities and social resources. A holistic approach should also be adopted by paying equal attention to the needs of male heads of households, who often undertake dangerous journeys to their home compelled by their traditional role of breadwinner, and who may be subject to frustrations dictated by the loss of role in the country of asylum.

The Iraqi displacement has reached a critical stage. International interest in Iraq is declining. Yet the lack of security, continuing civil conflict, and economic uncertainty make it unlikely that a mass Iraqi return will occur. More likely, Iraqi refugees will remain in neighbouring states under increasingly difficult circumstances. As their savings diminish and their circular movements into and out of Iraq to enhance their livelihoods become more precarious, it is likely that onward migration will become more necessary and urgent.

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