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# A quest for family protection: the fragmented social organisation of transnational Iraqi migration

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Forced migration from Iraq is an issue that currently runs high on several political and humanitarian agendas. Estimates by UNHCR put the number of Iraqi refugees at 2 million, concentrated mostly in Syria and Jordan, with another 2,5 million displaced inside Iraq. The humanitarian community identifies the shift in governance that took place when the Ba'thist regime was removed in March-April 2003 as having provided the initial context for this recent mass-displacement after the security and welfare systems that existed under the Ba'th were dismantled, leading to generalised violence and human insecurity.

In this paper, I will focus on displacement across international borders and I will argue against this chain of causalities based on a longer term perspective on Iraqi out migration that is hardly a new phenomenon, and on a reflexion on the notions of protection and security. Protection, although one of the key concepts of Refugee Law, is barely discussed in the other disciplines that engage with the study of refugees. Rather than questioning the legal perspective, I propose to reconsider protection and its corollary, basic human security, from an anthropological viewpoint on the nature of power, politics and state-citizen's relations in the Middle-Eastern polities within which the experiences of Iraqi exiles are anchored<sup>1</sup>. I shall argue that these shape not only migrants' own perception of protection and security as being located inside close-knit family units but also, at least in part, what I have conceptualised as 'the fragmented social organisation of transnational Iraqi migration' that predates by far the current crisis from which it cannot be separated.

My thought process will be inductive starting with observations from the field to give rise to theoretical considerations. This approach corresponds to my own position as a researcher having lived on my various fields in the Middle East for several years but also to my intellectual itinerary: I was led to conceptualise protection not as a theoretical premise informing my approach of the field, rather it emerged from my field observations.

This presentation is therefore organised as follows. The first part offers a sociology of Iraqis exiles in Amman, Jordan, focusing mainly on the pre-2003 period with extensions into more recent years. The second part considers the trends of global dispersal and social fragmentation among the wider Iraqi diaspora. The last part engages more directly with concepts of protection and security in Iraq from the perspective of political anthropology.

## **I. Invisible Iraqis in migration<sup>2</sup>**

In the late 1990s, the number of Iraqis in Jordan could be estimated at 300.000 in a country of 5 million people. Iraqis were mostly concentrated in Amman, a city of 1.5 million inhabitants. However, despite their high proportion in the urban population, they were in many ways invisible. On the one hand, their presence was barely acknowledged by the authorities, Jordanian residents, or most foreign and national relief agencies. On the other hand, illegality of status was making their situation precarious: most had overstayed the visitor permit on which they had entered Jordan. Their access to the labour market was confined to the informal sector where they unprotected by labour

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<sup>1</sup> On risk and security see Bech, Giddens and Douglas in bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> For detailed analyses on Iraqis in Jordan, see my articles in the bibliography.

laws. They were marginalised from the Jordanian welfare and educational systems. Poverty was widespread. Those invisible Iraqis were scattered in different informal, poor and lower middle-class neighbourhoods of Amman with a few clustering particularly around existing churches. Jordan did not have and still does not have today a domestic asylum regime. Only 5% of the total estimate of Iraqis in the country were registered with the local office of the UNHCR that conducted refugee status determination and resettlement of refugees to third countries. Recognition rate was notoriously low and registration as an asylum seeker did not guarantee any form of social benefit nor did it protect against *refoulement* to Iraq by the Jordanian authorities.

Iraqis have fled their country to Jordan on several phases, starting with the 1958 coup that overthrew the Iraqi monarchy. The most recent trends at the time of my research dated back to the 1990-1991 Gulf War when, according to some accounts, 1 million Iraqis and foreigners living in Iraq had crossed into Jordan over a period of 2 months. In the following years, successive groups of individuals kept arriving in Jordan, the only neighbour of Iraq with an open border. They were fleeing the deteriorating economic situation ensuing from the UN-imposed embargo on Iraq, various types of violence exerted by the regime on active or perceived opponents, and for some groups, like Christians from rural areas, vexations that were unhindered by the security forces. Most Iraqis identified as members of the educated middle-class, with a large proportion of professionals, including amongst women, and former civil servants. In the vast majority of cases, they were experiencing a painful social degradation in Jordan. Whatever their socioeconomic background, denomination, and geographical origin, the majority were cut off from possible sources of income or remittances from inside Iraq since, at the time, all types of communications and money transfers were impeded by the embargo and by the centralised control system put in place by the Iraqi government. Leaving Iraq was a long and arduous undertaking because the regime was strictly controlling the exit of its nationals with the result that most exiles had had to prepare their departure secretly over several months or even years and bribe their way out. At various times over that period, the regime also reiterated that Iraqis seeking asylum abroad were liable to receive the death penalty and managed to have this threat carried out by its agents even in distant asylum countries in the West.

There was also a more ancient migration of Iraqis to Jordan dating back from 1958 when the Iraqi monarchy was toppled and members of the former ruling elite were welcomed by King Hussein of Jordan, a close relative of the assassinated Iraqi monarch. This wave, and successive ones before the large influx of the 1990s, was composed of members of the political, intellectual and business elite and was either incorporated into the equivalent social class in Jordan, either later migrated durably to third countries mostly in Europe and America. At the time when I initiated my research there existed no literature on this social group or on Iraqi migration in the region, and very little on the more distant diasporas. However, in 2005, the American Research Institute in Iraq, that had relocated in Amman, launched the first phase of an oral history project focusing on Iraqis from the older generation of migrants. Two scholars, Hala Fattah and Lucine Tamimian, have conducted this project and communicated some of their findings that make a considerable contribution to the longer-durée of Iraqi migration to Jordan<sup>3</sup>.

However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there appeared to be little connections between the old and new generations of migrants. That trend was to continue after 2003. Both groups, themselves internally not coherent, were disconnected as members of different social classes having developed in subsequent historical and political contexts both in Iraq and in Jordan. They assessed their Iraqiness and perceived Jordan in sharply contrasting ways. Additionally, the old elite was careful not to jeopardise their position inside Jordan. Extending their patronage to members of a population that was unwanted by the Jordanian authorities would have brought them little if any benefit. On the

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<sup>3</sup> See article by Hala Fattah 2007 and presentation by Lucine Tamimian 2007.

other hand, the newcomers did not generally seek the patronage of the old elite who were simply not part of their social landscape.

The exceptions were artists, university professors and members of the professions represented throughout the various periods of Iraqi migration to Jordan and who formed solidarity networks encompassing Iraqis and Jordanians therefore playing an efficient role in reanchoring the newcomers socially and professionally and in allowing them access to a status as foreign residents with a work contract. Many of these migrants, who came throughout the period between 1990 and 2003, with new ones arriving after 2003, are still professionally active in Jordan today and have reconfigured the artistic milieu and the domain of higher education in the country. An on-going MA research by a young French scholar is expected to cast light on these recompositions, while a Swiss MA student has undertaken to look at similar dynamics in Syria, where Iraqis, who were a mere 20.000 before 2003, have fled in large numbers after the Syrian authorities allowed systematic entry following the fall of the Ba'hist regime: Syria is today estimated to be the first country of reception of Iraqi refugees.

In the pre-2003 period, the composition of the newly arrived Iraqi population in Amman had changed quickly over just more than a decade: the original working-age males were joined by their spouses and children, and families experienced natural growth. However, as new migrants arrived from Iraq, other ones left Jordan to a country where most would apply for asylum, therefore appearing in the statistics of national refugee agencies in Western countries, and giving an indication of the considerable volume of transit migration across Jordan over that period, anywhere between 200.000 and 400.000. The Iraqi migrant population in Jordan was in permanent recomposition as many of its members were only in transit for variable time-lengths, sometimes as long as several years.

In this instance again, secondary migration often took place in stages, one family member leaving ahead of his spouse and children, who were reunited with him or her either after a long institutional process within the framework of asylum mechanisms, or who embarked on a clandestine journey across continents. In contrast to previous generations of Iraqi exiles, who had been able to enter and settle in Europe or America through labour or student migration regimes, the post-1990 migrants were faced with the non-entry policies that most wealthy states had started to adopt in the 1980s and had no choice but to acquire legal status through asylum regimes. At that point, they started talking about themselves as asylum-seekers (*talbin lujū'*) or as refugees (*laji'in*), to denote the legal category host states had placed them in. However, they did not use these terms to qualify Iraqi migrants collectively, but spoke of themselves using various Arabic term, such as emigrants (*muhajirun*) or another one that carries many of the semantic connotations of the English term 'exiles' (*mughtaribin*).

As I was gathering the testimonies of Iraqis staying in Amman, trying to understand what their coping strategies were in an urban context in the absence of a legal status and what the factors were, apart from institutional ones, that explained their invisibility, three common recurrent themes kept surfacing in more informal face-to-face interviews or collective discussions. These were the situations that they had fled in Iraq, their anger and anxiety in the face of their new conditions in Jordan, and their prospects for further migration. I shall briefly sketch these three narratives in turn.

Iraq was best described as hell, the locus of terror, of unlimited and inescapable tyranny exerted by Saddam Hussein and his security forces, the site of torture, death, social dislocation and the unbearable division of family and friendship groups. Economic hardship under the embargo might have been one of the causes that prompted migrants to leave Iraq, but it was nothing in the face of the sentiment that ones' physical integrity and that of close associates was never guaranteed. The image of hell was used indiscriminately by my informers either religiously oriented or not. But the

former were likely to interpret their experience within a metaphor of divinely-imposed suffering and redemption, that fitted well within both Christian and Shi'i worldviews, and entertained the hope of punishment for the tyrant although this was not projected within human but eschatological times<sup>4</sup>. These individual experiences and collective representations were incommunicable to most Jordanians. The latter's general feeling was of support to and admiration for Saddam Hussein, perceived as the champion of Arabs vis-à-vis Western imperialism and whose attributes of masculinity, authority, strong leadership, unchecked power and military force were precisely the ones that had been put to bear so brutally on the minds and bodies of exiles.

Rarely was Jordan mentally constructed as a place of permanent abode. It was spoken of as a locus of economic and social insecurity where one could be nothing but uncertain about the future. Iraqis were sharing a diffuse sentiment of anxiety in part lingering from past trauma, in part fuelled by rumours of deportation carried out by the Jordanian authorities or of assassinations conducted inside Jordan by agents of Saddam's regime, or by the widespread belief that one such agent had infiltrated the local office of the UNHCR. Unlike Iraq, Jordan was not a site of terror, but it was still a site of fear because it was not perceived as an entity totally separated from Iraq where individual security could be guaranteed. Hence migrants adopted strategies of physical and identity concealment that resulted in their social invisibility. As a whole, and excluding those who had secured a legal status via professional, class or family connections, most Iraqis interacted with Jordanians only when it was necessary to ensure their basic living requirements. Mistrust was the norm, accompanied by a feeling of bitterness that what they had expected from Arab brothers in a country that had championed Arabness was unmet. The corollary was withdrawal into the close circle of family members, friends and co-religionists with whom to share trust, mutual assistance, and the feeling of a common experience in Iraq and in Jordan. However, Iraqis managed to carve out safer spaces inside Jordan. Homes were such spaces because the Jordanian security forces did not search houses, being content with irregularly arresting small numbers of Iraqi men in public places and sometimes deporting those who lacked a valid residency. Iraqi women, children and the elderly were not targeted and could move more freely. Other safe spaces were a couple of cafés tolerated by the authorities, together with churches of several denominations and Sunni mosques, these communities being all legally recognised in Jordan and their social and religious activities unhindered. The practicing Shi'is, on the other hand, did not enjoy a similar safety since their sect had not official recognition in Jordan and was perceived negatively both by the majority Sunni Moslem and minority Christian populations of the country. Iraqi Shi'is tried to maintain low profile places of gathering inside private homes but these were closely monitored by the Jordanian security.

As their stay endured, so grew their desire to travel further afield and reconstruct livelihoods in what they variably termed as 'developed' (*mutatawwar*) or 'safe' (*amin*) countries. By this they always meant Western Europe, North America or Australia. A large part of the every-day discussions of the Iraqis I met dealt with the feeling that they were but at one stage of an unfinished journey, with imaginations of the destination as a place where they would escape physical threats, be once and for all detached from their current Iraqi nationality that they identified as the main cause of insecurity -although they did not call into question their Iraqiness-, but also narratives of the uncertainties faced by relatives and friends who had taken the underground routes to such destinations, and finally discussions and exchange of information about the means to that end. It is almost exclusively in this type of narrative that references to actors in the international refugee regime such as UNHCR or national asylum agencies in prospective host countries were uttered. Often, they were simply juxtaposed with mentions of other facilitating institutions or individuals such as churches that sponsored refugee arrivals through national schemes in Australia or Canada, embassies of various 'safe' countries in Amman, migrant smugglers who operated travel services in the city, Iraqi religious leaders, Christian or Shi'is, who were in Amman or had made it to a safe

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<sup>4</sup> On Iraqi Shi'is living in 'religious time and space' in Dearborne see Shoeb et alii (2007).

country, or the International Committee of the Red Cross that offered an international family identification service that some migrants used to locate relatives in the diaspora, reconnect with them to gather information on destinations countries and sometimes to request financial assistance. The only hierarchy of preference was that of all other means over smugglers. UNHCR was neither trusted nor favoured for the reasons mentioned above, but also because the UN system in general was felt to have imposed the embargo over Iraq, and because many migrants did not want to be forced to resettle in a country that they had not chosen, since thus were the rules of the system. Most Iraqis knew rather precisely where they wanted to go: places where they had friends or relatives (who were not necessarily under a refugee status and with whom UNHCR-sponsored family reunification schemes could not be activated), or destinations about which they had formed an idea and which they thought would meet their moral, social or economic expectations.

Return was never on the agenda. Those who had left had no hope that tyranny in Iraq was about to come to an end in the near future. The only ones who attempted to go back did so with the aim of rescuing close family members, a spouse, children, sometimes a father or mother left behind, and bringing them to Jordan, or to sell a property in order to sustain themselves in exile or pay for a journey to safety.

From the several dozens of Iraqis whom I interviewed in 1998 and successive years, I maintained more intense contacts with 12 individuals (some of them as members of nuclear families). Our relationships were based on personal affinities and on my provision of material assistance and social connections to ease their stay in Jordan or help them achieve their final migration aims. These latter factors, which I did not mean to instrumentalise for further research, were nevertheless essential in gaining me their trust and their willingness to share with me details of their arrangements and journeys to reach Western countries, most of the time undertaken at the margin of legality. Although I did not intentionally select these individuals on the basis of sociological representativity, a methodological approach inadequate in the case of a social group living under uncertainty and fear, they nevertheless had different sociological profiles and were not interconnected. At one point or another between 1998 and 2001, all but one left Jordan for a variety of destinations (Canada, Denmark, Sweden, the UK and Australia) and we have continued ever since to communicate mainly via email. Also, in 1999 and again in 2001, I traveled to Iran and conducted several interviews with relatives of Iraqis I had met in Jordan. I remained in contact with two of my informants, themselves inclined to trust me, as they expressed it themselves, because I had helped their relatives in Jordan. Both of them eventually left Iran, one for Europe and then the USA, the other one for Australia. I visited the latter in transit in Pakistan in 2002. We are still communicating. In 2003, I visited one of my informants who had reached Denmark one year before and successfully claimed asylum, and met several of his Iraqi relatives and friends. I maintained regular communication with one of the latter. Immediately after the collapse of the Ba'athists in April 2003, a new category of exiles came to Jordan, those who were either closely associated with the former regime or had connections to protected themselves against its exactions. From among that group, I found two informants for whom thoughts of further migration came only at a second stage when they were either asked by the authorities to leave Jordan, or lost hope that the situation in Iraq was going to stabilise. Notable, they had not experienced terror at the hands of the Iraqi regime and did not share the feeling of fear of the previous group. One of them eventually migrated with his wife to Yemen, the only Arab country still receiving other Arab nationals under the principle of Arabness, that is on parity with its own citizens, granting them permanent residency, access to the labour market and social benefits. Although the country has a national asylum regime, the 40.000 Iraqi residents have not felt the need to apply for refugee status as I was told repeatedly when I visited my informants in Sanaa in February 2007 and met several other Iraqis who had settled there in various phases since the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. My second informant is still in Amman, currently securing the future of her daughters through marriage with Iraqis from the diaspora, a strategy that has become widespread

in the last few years, both for Iraqis in Jordan and Syria, now that more and more Iraqis from the pre-2003 period have accessed a stable legal status as refugees or citizens in a Western country.

Of these 12 privileged informants, all, with various temporalities and sets of means, have continuously identified their motive for migrating as reaching for a safe country, regrouping with members of their close family or ensuring their safety in several distant locations, encompassing spouses, children and at times parents, or, as heads of households, making sure that dependants, however dispersed, were in safety before they made provisions for their own future. The considerations that follow in the second part on the fragmented social organisation of Iraqi transnational migration are based on their narratives, on interviews conducted in a number of emigration countries further afield, and on a sparse literature of various nature with few instances of social science scholarship.

## **II. Transnational migration and fragmented social organisation**

Since the pre-2003 period, Iraqi emigration has been multi-polar, has taken place in stages, and has been multidirectional at all stages with the result that, just before the outbreak of the war in Spring 2003, the largest concentrations of Iraqis exiles, already at the time estimated between 2 to 4 million people, were in Iran, Jordan, Turkey, and Syria, all countries playing both long-term hosts and transit stages for migrants. The one million Iraqis that had gone beyond the Middle East were extremely dispersed geographically, with larger clusters in Western Europe, North America and the Pacific, mainly Australia.

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' restrictionist policies. This global dynamic has resulted in the creation of several concentric walls around Iraq that multiply the containment capacities of distant western states. I have explored this trend and its consequences on Iraqi migrants elsewhere (see paper for IACIS conference in Amman 2007).

In this part, I will theoretically draw heavily from the literature on transnationality and social networks that has developed this last decade, in particular as applied to forced-migrants. An ever growing body of literature charts the formation of diasporas and transnational communities in the age of globalisation, while these last few years have seen an interest in the study of irregular migration, particularly the role the human smuggling industry plays in helping undocumented migrants, including refugees, bypass stringent entry regulations. Both approaches convincingly bridge between the individual level and that of intermediary sociological forms such as social networks. However, while dismissing methodological individualism by embedding migrants' strategies within social ties, these demonstrations remain more informed by the context of economic migration than that of refugee migration. With a few notable exceptions, they overlook the fact that refugee migration can be first and foremost a collective family-oriented migration, where efforts are geared towards rescuing relatives from insecurity at home and neighbouring countries in the shortest possible time, and not at sending remittances and regrouping in a more distant future.

Security concerns are collective because Iraqi exile migration was and still rarely is an individual undertaking. Rather, in the vast majority of cases, families, nuclear and at times encompassing broader levels of kinship, were the targets of violence in Ba'athist as well as in post-Ba'athist Iraq, a point I will develop in my last section. Hence solidarity and trust could only develop between close family associates or friends. In all instances of migration to regional countries, and under different legal and institutional contexts of reception, families remain the main basis for network and support-system formation, a pattern that Kamel Dorai and Didem Danis have also discerned

amongst Iraqi exiles in Damascus and Istanbul (see bibliography).

But migration is also a threat to families as it splits them through a variety of processes: these include collective livelihood strategies when the breadwinner remains in Iraq and sends other members of the household to Syria, or, for example; asylum strategies where a wife or an under-age child migrate ahead to a distant safe country through irregular channels in order to improve their chances by launching asylum claim as single woman or unaccompanied minor; the conditions of irregular migrations where families have to leave behind those members who are too old or too frail to follow safely; access and reception policies in neighbouring countries that do not comply with the principle of family unity and do not allow entry or re-entry to family members; discriminatory policies practised by states or customs officials, for example banning one Shi'i while allowing one Sunni member as has been frequently the case with Jordan since 2006. One result is that women often find themselves alone and unprotected in insecure environments, as testimonies collected by Nadje Al-Ali among Iraqi women in the diaspora show (2007).

Family-oriented migration strategies are shaped by two often contradictory tensions: ensuring the safety of each member, and preserving the integrity of the family unit, two aims that migrants strive to meet in turn. What matters initially is that each member reaches a safe location, or several safe locations even geographically distant from one another. Efforts to regroup come at a second stage. In instances where security of members can be achieved through integrating into or creating a new family unit, as in the case of marriage with a migrant stabilised in a safe country, a frequent trend from Jordan and Syria (today the main host of Iraqi refugees) in recent years, then regrouping with this member becomes unnecessary but may happen if migration channels can be found for fathers, mothers or siblings. When finding family security in one place does not appear to be possible, family integrity may take priority over security concerns. An example are the 40,000 Iraqis who returned to Iraq from Syria, following the announcement in November 2007 that a visa application system was going to be implemented to replace the existing regime of universal entry.

These strategies of safety and regrouping take place over time and are difficult to discern and account for when taking a place and time-bound approach to migration movements. Hence the need not only to adopt a methodology in interviewing refugees that allows for mapping geographical dispersal of family members at a given point in time, but also the individual histories and trajectories of each member. Additionally, as members of families appear to be constantly in motion and adjusting strategies to respond to new constraints (more violence in Iraq, new border closures, restricted livelihood opportunities in Jordan or Syria, exhaustion of savings, unreliability or increasing costs of irregular migration, etc.), and as it may take between several months and several years for Iraqi migrant families to feel that they have come to the end of their collective migration cycle, then a research methodology limited by time and space appears inadequate. This is a challenge that I have tried to circumvent by engaging with the issue on the long-term, focussing on a cohort of informers whose detailed testimonies are inserted into broader sociological dynamics.

One such dynamic has been the fragmentation of the Iraqi diaspora world-wide along ethnic, denominational and class lines, to the point that it would be more appropriate to talk of Iraqi diasporas in the plural. This fragmentation is either structural to the country of reception, or endogenous to the community.

At the first stage of international migration, 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 (as in Syria for most religious denominations, and



Iran for Shi'is) or have discouraged it (as in Jordan for the Shi'is or Turkey for the Kurds) 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 diasporas, 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 Chaldean Christians, 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.

This process took up as early as the 1930s and 1940s for Iraqi Christians migrating to the UK or Australia, and in the early 1990s for other communities or in the case of new Christian arrivals in countries where there had no previous correligionists. Refugees resettled through UNHCR's procedures from countries neighbouring Iraq and other categories of migrants arriving irregularly consolidated existing communities of Iraqis in industrialised countries or created entirely new ones, as was the case for the Shi'is in Dearborn originally resettled after 1991 from a camp in Saudi Arabia and whom two of my priviledged informers joined from Jordan and Iran, together with a considerable number of other politicised Shi'is I interviewed in Jordan and Iran. 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.

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 with 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, much in the way Nicholas Van Hear has described other recent diasporas, while regional diasporas close to home are stabilising either through lack of transnational social linkages, or through access to very good local connections. But the social organisation, and in part the geographical distribution, of Iraqi migrants is characterised by its social fragmentation along class, ethnic and sectarian lines, while the main propellers of migration across space and time are the strategies families put in place to ensure the safety or the integrity of their members via migration.

### **III. Protection and security from an anthropological perspective**

It might come as a suprise that I shall devote so little space to the mass migration of Iraqis in the post-2003 period, whereas what has come to be termed the 'Iraqi refugee crisis' has now made it through the media as the 'biggest refugee crisis in the Arab region since the Palestinian *nakba* or exodus of 1948'. According to the UNHCR, since 2003, but mainly since 2006, 2,5 million people are said to have crossed borders into neighbouring states while 2 other millions are internally

displaced. The UN agency also identifies migrants from Iraq as the second-largest group of displaced persons worldwide by national origin. However, of the 2,5 million Iraqis that international agencies claim have crossed borders since 2003, large-scale surveys conducted in Syria and Jordan show that one third were in one or the other of these countries prior to the war. To take only Jordan, the current proportion of Iraqis to the national population is not higher than before 2003 while a number of Iraqis who had taken refuge in Jordan in the late 1990s and early 2000s moved to Syria after 2003 (particularly followers of the various Shi'i political movements). On the other hand, since the mid-1990s, Iraqis have been competing almost every year with other nationalities, notably Afghans, to topple the list of asylum claimants in what the UNHCR categorises as industrialised countries. At that time estimations from host countries in the region (Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon all with populations of unrecognised Iraqi refugees for lack of domestic asylum regimes) were absent from UNHCR's numberings. As for Iraqi in Iran, who were almost universally granted refugee status and that numbered between half and a quarter of a million, depending on types of statuses, they were counted in a different section of UNHCR's yearly statistical abstract since Iran is not an industrialised country. Nevertheless, UNHCR produced compilations of Iraqi refugee statistics amounting in 2001 to 2 millions including estimates of refugees in Arab countries and Turkey, but these were never given the publicity of the current ones. What is undeniably striking in the current trend is its volume over a short span of time, but let's also remember that over 1 million refugees both Iraqis and foreigners left Iraq to Jordan within two months at the time of the 1991 Gulf War, while 250,000 Kurds and Shi'is crossed into Iran and to a much lesser extent Saudi Arabia when their uprisings were repressed in 1991.

The current focus of refugee and relief agencies mainly on Syria and Jordan, that fails to acknowledge that the current wave is embedded in previous trends that have today taken a global scope, is understandable: practitioners are bound by time and space limitations, by a moral obligation for immediate relief action, by injunctions from donors and competition for funds, and also by more political agendas driven by asylum countries in the West and by main host countries in the region. The politics of numbers and of international and regional answers to the current crisis beg to be analysed within a longer-term perspective. This is beyond the scope of this paper however I am currently looking at the issue and will tackle it in a forthcoming conference.

Rather, now that Iraqis have become 'refugees', it might be heuristic to take a step back. From a social sciences perspective 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. As regards the sociology of Iraqi exiles in regional hosts countries, transnationality or the quest for family protection, there seem to be some changes but no major shifts. This is not to say that the factors that prompt Iraqis to leave Iraq have not changed, for example the demise of the 'development state' and declining living standard that prompt Iraqis to 'exit' the states as Philip Marfleet has argued in a recent article, or that internal dynamics within host countries or in Iraq are not being modified durably by the presence or absence of a large number of Iraqis, as Joseph Sassoon is currently writing about from the perspective of political economy, in particular with a view on brain drain.

Philip Marfleet, examining the determinants to the mass flight of the last two years, sees the *cumulative* effect of pressures on the Iraqi population as key to understanding recent patterns of movement: decline of living standards, and new crises of security have led more and more Iraqis to seek 'exit'. He analyses Ba'hist Iraq as a 'development state' that maintained control over economic affairs, subsidises basic good and energy supplies and put in place a welfare system. Some of these features were maintained over the period of economic sanctions in particular through the organised distribution of basic foods through government-run stores using ration cards. However, Marfleet admits along with other analysts, while the sanctions impoverished the population, brought about the collapse of the middle-class, sustained Iraq's civilian infrastructure in a state of chronic

disrepair, but in fact strengthened the regime and the state military apparatus.

Following the American invasion the state as an apparatus of rule was assaulted directly through 'de-Ba'athification' of the armed forces and civil administration. At the same time it was marginalised as an influence on economic affairs and the country was open to free-market economy, inducing high rises in basic commodities while unemployment peaked at over 50%. As the state withdrew, Marfleet argues, most of the Iraqi population was exposed to pressures usually associated with the terminal decline of 'failed states' (Rotberg 2002): as of 2005, in many areas of western and central Iraq security collapsed. Kidnappings, assassinations, 'disappearances' and killings by death squads were used to target civilian members of communities now deemed to be enemies together with community leaders and professionals. Women became particularly vulnerable.

On the other hand, when the institutions of the state were dismantled, sweeping away an essentially secular urban cadre, the provisional authority was set based upon communal affiliation and later encouraged development of political parties and militias, which recruited in ethno-religious constituencies. With most Iraqis increasingly desperate about jobs, income and access to food, fuel, water and electricity, sectarian parties and communal networks exerted a much stronger influence. In the absence of a strong central state, resources came increasingly through links to family, clan, religious institutions and parties.

Marfleet argues that neo-liberalism has created conditions in which socio-political/cultural differences and divisions entrenched by colonialism have re-emerged; in which competing factions struggle for control over what remains of state resources; and in which insecurity and conflict produce repeated crises of mass displacement. According to the author, these factors provided the context for the emergence of the refugee crisis in Iraq. It is in these circumstances, he argues along the concept proposed by Zolbert, that large numbers of people seek 'exit' from the state.

However, if interrogated from the discipline of historical anthropology, the temporalities of states, international actors, or major political players do not appear to be extremely relevant in accounting for the long-term drivers and modalities of exile from Iraq. Notwithstanding the relevance of the economic terms of Marfleet's analysis, a perspective on the nature of power and state-society relations informed by political anthropology and spanning both the pre- and post-2003 periods would lead to conclusions different from the ones at which he arrives, showing continuity and not rupture in the process of mass displacement from Iraq and on strategies of 'exit' that I suggest to recast in terms of strategies of protection.

Considered normatively, there is something intrinsically wrong with the political link defined as the relation between state and society in Iraq under Ba'athist rule or American Protectorate. Neither instance is a democratic state in which, rooted in a social contract theory of the state, the governing body acts on behalf of the citizens rather than in its own interests. Rather, to paraphrase Talal Asad (1993), in Iraq power continues 'to realise itself through the dislocation of people in different ways'.

In the narratives of migrants I collected during episodes of field work in Jordan, Syria, Iran, Pakistan, Yemen and Europe Saddam Hussein's state was not viewed by those who managed to 'exit' as a welfare provider or developer but more as an Orwellian 'big brother'. On the one hand, under the Ba'ath patrimonial-totalitarian regime, the single party system hegemonised, destroyed and absorbed all nascent civil society structures and institutions, such as unions, professional associations, an independent press, chambers of commerce, etc. as Sami Zubayda has shown.

Kanan Makiya proposed that the regime, in its last period, demonstrated a drift from authoritarian to totalitarian rule. Together with the selective provision of welfare to clients, and the deliberate and literal starving of others, the practices of the regime and its state apparatus on society were

discrimination and terror, arbitrary arrest and torture, absence of justice, mass displacement used as tool of government, withdrawal of citizenship from entire social groups. Many of these practices were in continuity with those of previous regimes: sectarianism and oppression by the state of ethnic or religious groups (such as the Kurds and the Shi'is) have existed since the emergence of the modern Iraqi state; successive regimes have used as tools of governance deportation, exile and denial of citizenship to Assyrians, Jews, Kurds and Shi'is in turn.

Individual responsibility as a principle of justice was not upheld: entire social groups, from nuclear families, to clans, tribes and religious communities, the latter often the ultimate extension of an aggregate of kinship groups in Middle Eastern societies, were held responsible for the action of one of their members. Henceforth the opponent or enemy was not targeted individually but as a member of a group. Rooted in a perception of blood-based kinship as the defining feature of the social order, and of absolute patriarchal power of life and death as a style of government, Saddam had his own son-in-law executed after he defected to Jordan in 1995 and returned to Iraq the following year. In the same vein, Saddam Hussein justified the denial of citizenship and deportation of hundreds of thousands of Shi'is to Iran using the language of kinship, the one in which he wanted the national community to be imagined, calling repeatedly the Iranians the paternal uncles and the 'parents' of the expellees (Babakhan).

Hamit Bozarslan sees dislocation, deregulation and loss of sense are long-term features of Iraqi society under Ba'thist rule stemming from recurrent violence exerted on society by successive conflicts (the Iran-Iraq War, the invasion of Kuwait, the second Gulf War, the American invasion), episodes of mass repression (chemical weapons against the Kurds in 1988-1989, the crushing of the Shi'i and Kurdish revolts in 1991) but also the drainage of the marshes and the UN-imposed embargo. In Ba'thist Iraq, violence, Hamit Bozarslan wrote, "led to the destruction of all temporal and spatial reference marks capable of giving to the Iraqis a sense to their past or to project themselves in the future. This deep deregulation translated into the extreme weakening of all social links and the loss of confidence in oneself as well as in the others. The destruction of politics condemned each segment of the society to act either at an infra-political level, or at a meta-political level". It was the absence of individual power in the face of an arbitrary state and the lack of intermediary social bodies that drove men and women to turn to infra-ethnic and infra-state levels both to protect themselves and to seek promotion within the state.

The system was held together by fear, what Makiya describes as "the kind of fear that comes not only from what neighbours say, but that makes people careful of what they say in front of their children. This fear had become part of the constitution of citizenship".

In the last instance, alienation from the state provoked withdrawal into domestic groups experienced as refuges and spaces where ontological security was sought yet not always guaranteed since the state did not respect even this sanctuary. Nuclear families (altogether embedded in the social order and serving as a metaphor to maintain the political order) were the maximally solidary communities based on affection and loyalties. Mistrust prevailed towards all circles beyond the nuclear family because beyond that circle the individual felt at risk of being subject to violence. Makiya sees withdrawal inside families and exit from Iraq as similar processes: "Thus, he writes, in Iraq a degree of personal refuge from the onslaught of Ba'thism was still possible by a sort of 'reverse dissolution', back into the arms of an original social group, whether family or confessional. A more intense version of this withdrawal was being expressed by more independent or financially able individuals when they patiently schemed to get out of the country, sometimes taking years. But the predominant form of withdrawal for those who were locked in was still religious identification and the family group."

In the case of Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion, where the national link was weak, Monsutti<sup>5</sup> describes the relations between population and government as characterised by mistrust and avoidance. However, the Afghan state did not have a monopoly upon legitimate force and was not of a totalitarian nature, penetrating all spaces of society. Unlike in the Iraqi case, local communities had developed efficient networks of mutual support that were not encapsulated in the central administration. Hence trust could exist not only at the level of the family, but also within dyadic friendship relations, within the neighbourhood, of inside religious traditions and rituals. The example of Hazara migratory strategies that Monsutti examined led him to put kinship ties in perspective: he found them to be sometimes less relevant than links based on residential proximity or friendship. In Iraq, however, mistrust prevailed towards all circles beyond the nuclear family and very close friends because beyond that circle the individual felt at risk of being subject to violence.

For those who exited Iraq, fear and mistrust beyond the close family circle endured in migration, especially in neighbouring countries where they experienced other forms of insecurity, were not assured to be out of the reach of the violence exerted by the Iraqi regime, and where the nature of social and political dynamics were different from those in Iraq only as a matter of degree: authoritarian as opposed to totalitarian rule, omnipresence of the security apparatus, regimes that had fuelled the political and social roles of extended kinship groups and selected religious communities or ethnic groups while marginalising others.

Reproducing the model of protection and re-linkage they were familiar with at home, Iraqi migrants have sought to be re-linked in Jordan, Syria or Turkey through intermediary, non-state institutions (professional associations, cooptation into artistic or intellectual circles, patronage from members of the monarchical elite in Jordan, religious institutions) and not through universal state-driven mechanism of incorporation. Mistrust of state and other official institutions, together with trauma, fear, and the socially entrenched habit of relying on other networks of solidarity shape the livelihood strategies of Iraqis in migration. New forms of cohesion and solidarity have sometimes appeared but the context of migration defines the ability of individuals to mobilise these links: in Jordan, where some Sunni tribal shaykhs visit regularly, tribal solidarity can be called upon. In Syria, where Shi'i religious leaders have extended their influence, communal-based support-systems have developed. In several cases, previous knowledge of the existence of protection-providers in neighbouring countries has driven the direction of the migration and explain why individuals have selected one country of refuge over the other.

In a context where they have not experience emancipation from family structures and where other affiliations have been 'primordialised' as a result of specific state-society dynamics, Iraqi migrants posture themselves as being in search of the protection of powerful patrons. Diane King, examining the phenomenon of Iraqi Kurdish out-migration to the West between 1991 and 2003, argues similarly that migrants looked to the West and Westerners as potential patrons and were incited to migrate by their conceptualizations of patronage and clientage roles based on prior experience as clients of the state, tribal leaders, and other figures

In today's Iraq, the nature of the state has changed from a totalitarian to a collapsed state, however, in a situation that continues to be characterised by terror, physical insecurity and recourse to alternative agents of protection, there is still something intrinsically wrong with the political link. Irrespective of the nature of the structural factors, individuals in Ba'thist and post-Ba'thist Iraq experience threats to their livelihoods and lives in a similar way, where elements of economic and physical insecurity are combined and where the state and intermediary structures are equally selective and arbitrary in extending their protection to individuals.

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<sup>5</sup> See Monsutti, A. (2005) *War and Migration: social networks and economic strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan*, Routledge.

Arguably, the genealogy of cumulative causation predates by far the 2003 political and economic turn, and is anchored in the *longue-durée* of state-society relations in contemporary Iraq. The current situation has merely increased the propensity to migrate of large segments of the population who were prevented to 'exit' by the containment measures the previous regime had put in place, and who instead had exiled themselves internally inside family or communal circles. Had out-migration been open to all at the time of the Ba'th, it is likely that the scale of departure from Iraq would have been much larger in the 1990s and early 2000s. Many of my informants who have left since 2003 testify that their migration aspirations pre-date by far the regime change and were impeded by the control exerted on exit.

By all means, a considerable part of the Iraqi population under the Ba'thist political order were refugees inside the only social spaces that escaped, however imperfectly, the lethal influence of the state. The demise of the old order in Iraq did not bring about a restoration of the political link, on the contrary it accentuated the splitting up of society and multiplied the sites and agents of unchecked violence. Those Iraqis that have finally managed to leave their country en masse since 'exit' has been made possible are 'voting with their feet' against centralised political authorities as they have known them, be they authoritarian or imperialistic, clad in democratic values or imagined as national families. In the course of their modern history, Iraqis have paid too dear a price to put their trust in states anymore. Seen in this light, it is therefore not surprising that most exiles in countries of first asylum mistrust all institutional expressions of states and shun the services of relief organisations and UN agencies. In the same logic, exiles are prone to instrumentalise the asylum regimes and welfare systems of distant safe states, therefore posturing themselves in sharp opposition with the letter of International Refugee Law that posits the individual not as its subject but as its object, thus ensuring the reproduction of the interests of states over those of the individual.

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- Mohamed Kamel Dorai 'The social networks of Iraqis in Damascus'
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