

# Refuge in Syria

## Where Duty Outweighs Human Rights-Based Approaches

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### Introduction

Iraqis, as modern citizens, have been moving into and out of Syria since the foundation of the states of Iraq and Syria in the wake of the Paris Peace Conference at the close of the First World War. Despite Wilsonian aspirations for self-determination, the League of Nations agreed to the carving up of Greater Syria (*Bilad al-Sham*) into British and French colonial mandates. The lines drawn by Mark Sykes defining the contours of British-mandated Iraq and French-mandated Syria within Greater Syria separated a significant number of families, businesses and other interests across national borders, but the horizontal social ties and economic networks remained. During times of upheaval and political crises, the frontiers were often fuzzy and politicians from both states often crossed the borders to escape persecution or death in one country or the other.<sup>1</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, Damascus was a place of political refuge for numerous political elites from around the developing world, including Iraqis such as Nuri al-Malik, the prime minister in the post-Saddam Hussein era from 2006 to 2014, and Iyad Allawi, the interim prime minister from 2004 to 2005 and vice president from 2014 to 2015.

Over the hundred years or so of the existence of the modern nation state of Iraq there has been a steady trickle of Iraqis going into exile or seeking asylum in Syria and the other modern states that were previously part of

*Bilad al-Sham*. That trickle became a steady flow in the 1980s and 1990s under Saddam Hussein's harsh dictatorship and eventually became a massive flood in the mid-2000s. Why did this come about and what kind of reception did the Syrian state lay out for their Iraqi 'guests'? Was it in alignment with the international humanitarian aid regime's response to this crisis? How was it different and what can be learned from this case study of temporary guesthood and competing notions of refuge and refugees?

In this chapter, I first give a brief overview of the widespread but often ignored history of displacement within the region in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the deterritorialized nature of belonging in the then Ottoman empire and its *millet* system. I go on to describe the perplexing elements of the contemporary Iraqi humanitarian crisis that was unleashed in the aftermath of the Western build-up to destroy 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq in 2003. This is followed by a discussion of the willingness with which Syrian society allowed Iraqis to integrate and to make themselves 'at home' without assimilating or letting go of their Iraqi identity. These social norms and practices can thus be regarded as continuities in duty-based approaches to hospitality for the stranger that emerged from and were encouraged in late Ottoman responses to mass influx. When, a decade later, Syrians were forced to flee their country, to neighbouring states, they also largely self-settled in urban centres and were dutifully regarded by their hosts as temporary guests or workers. As these norms and social acts are at variance with standard practices in the international refugee regime, are there lessons to be learned regarding duty-based and human rights-based approaches to refuge and asylum?

## Mass Influx and Asylum in the Ottoman Empire

Contrary to much popular thinking, the organized response to mass influx of forced migrants was not a twentieth-century invention, but rather emerged much earlier. The nineteenth century Ottoman empire, in the course of its six wars with Tsarist Russia, witnessed wave after wave of forced migrants entering its territory from its borderlands. In most cases these forced migrants had little time to prepare for their exile and often travelled with little more than the clothes on their backs and whatever they could pile onto their ox carts. Their survival on the road depended on the kindness of local people and municipal authorities as they made their way south. Many died on the road from starvation or disease. Over time, these expulsions were accompanied by local Ottoman civil society organizations to assist and re-settle the forced migrants. Local towns and cities opened their mosques and churches to shelter and feed the exiles. But as the sheer scale of the mass influx became clear, a centralized organization became necessary.

In 1857, in response to the more than five hundred thousand forced migrant Muslim Tatars from the Crimea entering the empire, the Ottoman Sublime Porte promulgated a Refugee Code (also translated from Ottoman Turkish into English in some texts as the Immigration Law). Responding to the urgent need to provide shelter and food for those expelled initially from the Crimea but also from other borderland regions with Russia, the Ottoman government set out swiftly to disperse and integrate its forced migrants. Those 'immigrant' families and groups with only a minimum amount of capital were provided with plots of state land to start life anew in the Ottoman empire in agricultural activity. Families who applied for land in Anatolia and Greater Syria were exempted from taxation and military conscription for twelve years. Ottoman reformers were eager to see the largely depopulated Syrian provinces revived by these new migrants after several centuries of misadministration, war, famine and several pandemics of plague (Shaw and Shaw 1977: 115).

As rising requests for plots of state land came in from forced migrants and potential immigrants, the Ottoman authorities set up a refugee commission (the Ottoman Commission for the General Administration of Immigration) in 1860 under the Ministry of Trade. The following year it became a separate public authority (Shaw and Shaw 1977: 115). The Commission was charged with integrating not only the Tatars and Circassians fleeing from lands conquered by the Russians north and west of the Black Sea, but also the thousands of non-Muslim immigrant farmers and political leaders from Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland, Cossacks from Russia and Bulgarians from the Balkans seeking refuge (*ibid.*: 116). The Ottoman approach to the forced migrants was both instrumental – reviving agriculture and tax farming – and politically astute, as it sought to manage local political conflicts along the margins between pastures and agricultural land with Circassian and Chechnyan settlements.

## **Deterritorialized Belonging and Social Duty of Hospitality**

What was remarkable about the Ottoman empire was the way that its organizing ethos was not based on territorial rootedness but rather on religious affiliation. Belonging was tied to social places rather than physical spaces. In other words, belonging in this region of the Eastern Mediterranean, until the end of the Second World War, was based on recognition of the superiority of Islam in the empire, alongside a tolerance of the *Ahl-il-Kitab* – its Jewish and Christian communities. The latter was not just derived from religious tenets, but emerged also from economic and political realism. European nineteenth-century economic and political interests in the Christian

and Jewish communities in the Middle East, as well as Ottoman principles of self-governance for these ethno-religious groups, resulted in the mid-nineteenth-century Ottoman reforms that formally legislated the establishment of protected communities, *millet*s, whose religious and social affairs were organized from within the structure of the church or synagogue.<sup>2</sup> It was the legacy of these *millet*s that shaped the way in which the migrants (forced and voluntary), exiles and other dispossessed peoples of *Bilad al-Sham* (Greater Syria) would be successfully integrated without being assimilated into the fabric of the modern societies and cultures of the Levant. These new states – Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine – continued to maintain the legacies of the *millet* in their formal legislation as well as in social practices; here, social norms and concepts of duty were prioritized in providing refuge to those in need (Chatty 2013).

With the end of the First World War, the largely successful, multicultural and religiously plural Ottoman empire was rapidly dismantled. However, despite the forced migrations of millions of ethno-religious minorities (as well as Muslim majorities from the Balkans), which saw an entire empire on the move, the legacy of the deterritorialized aspects of belonging tied to the Ottoman ethno-religious *millet*s laid the foundations for later elaborations of forced migration integration based on kinship ties, economic networks and notions of social and religious duty. These movements were mainly circular and back and forth between relations, co-religionists, colleagues, customers and creditors between the modern Arab successor states carved out of Greater Syria. This movement and horizontal fluidity were first recognized in the contemporary humanitarian aid regime, particularly the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), with the arrival of forced migrants from Iraq in Syria. With identity and security based on family, lineage and ethno-religious *millet*s, movement did not represent a decoupling, or deracination, but rather a widening of horizontal networks of support and solidarity that stretched throughout the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman empire (*Bilad al-Sham*). Relatives, close and distant, had already been spread over a wide region far beyond the confines of the modern Iraqi nation state and could be called on for support, shelter and security when needed.

Notions of hospitality, generosity and the worthiness of the guest in augmenting individual and family honour are fundamental to an understanding of many societies and cultures. They are particularly characteristic of the Arab world, where notions of modernity are mixed with those of custom and customary principles of behaviour and action. Hospitality and generosity encompass notions of dignity, respect, protection and security. The family, the lineage, the social group and the nation's reputation are, in many ways, hostages to correct behaviour with a guest or stranger; inappropriate behaviour might lead to disrespect, danger and insecurity. Thus, in Syria,

Iraqis were welcomed as temporary guests. And as long as they behaved as was required of a guest, they were treated as nationals and allowed to go about their business of settling in, setting up businesses or engaging in circular migrations in and out of Iraq without risk of detection or labelling as 'refugees' or 'forced migrants'.

Contrary to the dominant discourse on hospitality in the West and in humanitarian aid settings, where asylum seekers are placed in the middle ground between mere biological life and full social existence in detention centres and refugee camps (Agamben 1998), the notions of hospitality and generosity in Syria and the neighbouring Arab states of Jordan and Lebanon have made it nearly impossible for the governments and civil society to adopt the 'bureaucratic indifference' to human needs and suffering so common in the international humanitarian aid regime. Syria, as with most countries of the Middle East, has no domestic asylum laws, largely because asylum is deeply rooted in notions of individual, family and group reputation. The nation is regarded as the home, and the head of the family is sovereign of the state. The nation becomes a house in which hospitality can be offered and received. The collective memory of a number of forced displacements over the past few centuries means that yesterday's guest is readily acknowledged as today's neighbour (Zaman 2016: 131). In this sense the host is thus someone who has the power to give to the stranger (generosity) but remains in control (Derrida 2000). Providing hospitality (or asylum) in this region is seen as increasing the individual's, the family's and the nation's reputation for generosity. Thus, customary law, social norms and a moral positioning to treat the stranger as guest do not require national legislation to be implemented, and the setting up of international humanitarian refugee camps becomes problematic, if not repugnant.

## Becoming Iraqi

Understanding why Iraqis have been trickling and then flooding out of Iraq for decades requires a brief review of its modern history. The Kingdom of Iraq emerged from the Paris Peace Conference at the close of the First World War. In keeping with the secret wartime negotiations of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Allied parties entrusted the League of Nations, which they established, with awarding British administration over the Kingdom of Mesopotamia in 1919. This region between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers consisted largely of the former Ottoman cities and hinterlands of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul, which the British troops had invaded at the onset of the First World War. Upon the awarding of this mandate to Great Britain, the Iraqi population immediately rose up in a massive and violent protest, called the Great Iraqi Revolt of 1920. Gertrude Bell, a leading figure in the

creation of the Iraqi state, had predicted that the Iraqi people would favour benign British rule (Burgouyne 1961: 104).<sup>3</sup>

Many of the elite, urbanite, tribal leaders and former Ottoman army officers in Baghdad initially rejected this colonial imposition and fanned the flames of uprising. After all, the other British wartime agreement – the Hussein–MacMahon Accords of 1915 – had promised the Arabs their own kingdom, of which Mesopotamia would be an integral part, if they rose up in revolt against the Ottomans. They had upheld their part of the agreement, as witnessed by the triumphant entrance into Jerusalem and then Damascus of the conquering forces of General Allenby and those Arabs who had fought with Emir Faysal and T. E. Lawrence. The Kingdom of Syria was thus created in 1918, and officially declared in March 1920, but was defeated by invading French troops in July of the same year. The betrayal of the Hussein–MacMahon Accords was seen as profound, and violence rapidly spread throughout the mandated territory, forcing the British to bring in more troops from India to quell the uprising.

By 1921, much of the urban elite of Baghdad and leaders of the major Sunni Bedouin tribes acquiesced to British rule (Dodge 2003), and a plebiscite was held to arrange for the deposed King Faysal of the short-lived Kingdom of Syria (1918–20) to be made King of Iraq. His brother, Abdullah, was made Emir of the British-mandated territory of Transjordan in the same year.<sup>4</sup> However, matters did not run smoothly. Opponents of the mandate were exiled, and Shiite and Kurdish communities were sidelined. Massive uprisings continued, and by 1922, the British decided to supplement and partially replace their mechanisms of control from ground troops to Royal Air Force bombers (Dodge 2006). The continuous air bombardment of villages and towns, as well as of fleeing Bedouin and their herds of camel and sheep, made for a theatre of ‘shock and awe’ in its time. One elderly tribesman speaking to a Special Forces officer in 1924 remarked, ‘There are only two things to fear: Allah and *Hakumat al tayyarrat* [government by aircraft]’ (Dodge 2003: 131). In 1925, Leopold Amery, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, wrote in his memoirs that the Royal Air Force was the backbone of the whole of the British occupation. ‘If the writ of King Faysal runs effectively through his kingdom, it is entirely due to the British airplanes . . . If the airplanes were removed tomorrow, the whole structure would inevitably fall to pieces . . . I do not think there can be any doubt about that point’ (ibid.).

By the middle of the 1920s the British had turned to some of Iraq’s ethno-religious minorities to help them police this unruly state. They relied heavily on the Assyrians (a Christian minority) to make up the country’s gendarmerie – a branch of the armed forces responsible for internal security. Neutral throughout most of the First World War, the Assyrians later took the side of Great Britain and made up the Iraqi Levies (or Assyrian levies)

under the command of British officers. After a decade of unrest, constant civil disturbances and unsuccessful efforts to subdue dissident factions of Iraqi people, Britain declared Iraq unmanageable. It admitted that it could not turn the three former Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul into a 'modern democratic state' and returned its mandate to the League of Nations in 1932. But it maintained a military presence in the country as well as several political advisors. The Assyrians, who had worked closely with the British, were the most vulnerable to reprisals. Thus, the first massive wave of forced migrants from Iraq in the 1930s was the Assyrians who fled Iraq for Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and the West. The Assyrians who did not flee the country tended to gravitate to the north of the state, a region roughly coterminous with the ancient state of Assyria. The newly independent Kingdom of Iraq then commenced consolidating its will over the population by either sending individual politicians into exile or moving entire communities from one part of the country to another.

Finally, in 1958, a coup took place that ended the monarchy and saw a wave of 'royalists' flee the country. The Iraqi king and his family were executed along with those who were not quick enough to flee. Those who escaped the country made their way to Jordan where they were welcomed by the Jordanian Hashemite king Hussein. The new 'republican' state leadership in Iraq continued the practice of dispossession and eviction on a larger and wider scale. Misconduct of an individual politician could result in an entire tribe or clan being exiled. The steady movement out of the country throughout most of the twentieth century then gained momentum after 1978 when Saddam Hussein came to power. His despotism and unpredictable actions caused many of the country's social elite to leave the state. The decade long Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s increased the outmigration from the country. But it was the aftermath of the First Gulf War and the sanctions imposed by the West in 1991 that saw a steady stream of Iraqis (hundreds of thousands) leaving the country to escape increasingly desperate circumstances.

By 2003 reports indicate that there were over three hundred thousand Iraqis settled in Jordan. In Syria, Lebanon and Egypt it is likely that there was a similar population of Iraqi exiles, totalling about two hundred thousand. The presence of nearly five hundred thousand Iraqis in the region prior to 2003 was felt in business and in the arts. These were largely educated, middle- or upper-middle-class urban professionals. They formed solidarity networks for newcomers, helping to re-anchor recent arrivals without resorting to international aid. They were largely invisible to humanitarian assistance regimes, as they did not seek formal recognition, but rather relied on Arab notions of hospitality and traditions of giving asylum to settle and create new lives for themselves, all the while reinforcing pre-existing social, political and economic networks across the borders of the Arab states.

## Iraq and Weapons of Mass Destruction

In November 2002 the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously to back an Anglo-American Resolution (No. 144) requiring Iraq to reinstate United Nations weapons inspectors. This measure marked a key step in the race towards a war that began five months later, when US air strikes launched 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' on 20 March 2003. In the intervening five months, a series of assessments from the humanitarian aid regime suggested that military action might displace more than a million people within Iraq and across its borders. The United Nations Agency for Refugees (UNHCR) and numerous international and national non-government agencies (IGOs and NGOs) hurriedly prepared to receive large numbers of Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Syria and Iran. They negotiated the establishment of reception centres and camps, stockpiled food, pre-positioned non-food items and prepared for the transfer of further materials through ports in Jordan and Turkey. Yet, six months after the March invasion, few Iraqis had fled their country. None had fled into Iran, a few hundred had registered in Syria and some two thousand had arrived in Jordan. It seemed that the international aid community had misjudged. Camps were dismantled, pre-positioned food and other items were removed and the international aid regime sat back (for more details see Chatty 2003).

Then, three years later in 2006, governments and international agencies were caught off-guard as hundreds of thousands of largely educated middle-class urban Iraqis fled their homes, seeking to escape a collapse in social order manifested in a complete lack of security and deadly sectarian violence. Although estimates varied widely, between one and two million Iraqis travelled to Jordan and Syria, settling largely in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo and Amman. Others moved to Cairo and Istanbul. By 2008 the number of Iraqi applicants for asylum in states of North America and Europe was more than double the total of both the second (Somalia) and third (Russian Federation) largest source countries combined (UNHCR 2009a).

In the states neighbouring Iraq, the UNHCR and other international non-government organizations raced, once again, to set up reception centres and to provide emergency aid and measures for protection in an environment where international legal protection to asylum seekers and refugees was unknown. Despite concerted effort by the UNHCR, Iraqis were not appearing at UNHCR offices to register as refugees. An existential threat to the UNHCR – no refugees, no mandate – resulted in the agency taking innovative steps to find and register Iraqis. A mobile registration programme was designed and implemented with UNHCR staff moving about the urban neighbourhoods where they knew there was a strong Iraqi presence to encourage people to register. Yet, by the end of 2011, fewer than two hundred thousand Iraqis out of an assumed 1.2 million had been registered with the



UNHCR in Syria. Clearly there was a significant disparity in perceptions among the displaced Iraqis and the international aid regime regarding the solutions to their plight. For the United Nations, durable solutions consisted of voluntary return, local integration or third country resettlement. The displaced Iraqis had different ideas of how to manage their exile. These same practices would be repeated by displaced middle-class Syrians in neighbouring states a decade later. Would the UNHCR learn from this experience?

Iraqi forced migrants now constitute one of the largest refugee populations worldwide. Nearly five million Iraqis have been displaced after the Western military invasion to remove Saddam Hussein from power in 2003, and by the sectarian breakdown and insecurity that followed (al-Khalidi et al. 2007). Approximately two million are labelled as refugees because they have crossed international borders and 2.8 million are designated as internally displaced people (IDPs) within their own country. Sectarian and ethnic violence is the dominant characteristic of this displacement. The un-mixing of neighbourhoods has rendered internal displacement a semi-permanent feature within Iraq, while those who have crossed international borders show little inclination to return except in very small numbers (Marfleet and Chatty 2009). Today Iraq is far from stable, and the Iraqi government has not been able to create the conditions for successful return of either refugees or IDPs. The bombing of Iraqi churches in 2003 and thereafter also gave rise to further outmigration as Iraq's Assyrian Christians – numbering nearly half a million – came to be increasingly targeted by insurgents. Many made their way to the Christian neighbourhoods of Hassakeh, Qamishli and Damascus, where they found a measure of security under the Syrian government's determination to protect the ethno-minorities in the country. Despite the armed conflict, escalating violence and terror being felt in Syria since 2011, return movement to Iraq has been limited and is unlikely to morph into significant return to central Iraq.

Most of Iraq's forced migrants fled to Syria, with a smaller percentage to Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. Evidence, so far, from Syria and the other countries suggests that the tolerance of their host governments will continue, even if begrudgingly, in part because of the generous response at the local level among neighbours and hosting families (see Chatty and Mansour 2012). Often unwilling to return and largely unable to emigrate to the West or to Europe, Iraq's refugees are in a perilous situation: the largely Sunni Muslim and Christian (Assyrian) Iraqis are not welcome back to the newly created 'democratic', but Shiite-controlled, Iraqi state that emerged with the backing of the United States.

Iraqis have caught the Western humanitarian aid regime off-guard: first, with their refusal to flee at the beginning of the 2003 invasion of their country, second in their mass flight as the country descended into sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing and anarchy in 2006 and thirdly in their reluctance

to register with the UNHCR as refugees. In both Syria and Jordan, Iraqis were not regarded as refugees by the host governments, partially because neither country was a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. More importantly, both Syria and Jordan regarded Iraqis as their 'brother Arabs' and categorized them as temporary guests, as do Lebanon and Egypt. Their reception and protection in these countries of sanctuary depends upon social norms and customs, social networks and kinship ties rather than any mechanisms of international refugee law.

Many of the Iraqis seeking asylum were from the educated, professional and middle class. A number managed to escape with savings, which helped to ease their transition into urban centres. Previous waves of migrations during earlier decades meant that some Iraqi social networks were already in place in the host countries. The residual cultural memory of the *millet* system of the Ottoman empire, which gave minority or religious communities a limited amount of power to regulate their own social group's affairs, meant that Iraqi arrivals in these cities were generally tolerated, if not actively comforted. Also, memory of the pan-Arab aspirations dating back to the end of the First World War in the region meant that Iraqis were seen as temporary guests and 'Arab brothers'.<sup>5</sup>

In April of 2009 the UNHCR surprisingly declared that security in Iraq had improved to the extent that people displaced from most regions of the country should no longer be viewed as refugees. It began to formally prepare for the imminent return of 'large numbers' to Iraq. The facts on the ground, however, were that Iraqis kept their distance; the majority refused to come forward. Some Iraqis feared involuntary repatriation to Iraq if they registered with the UN agency. Others said that they feared returning to a country where the mixed ethno-religious communities and the legacy of Ottoman tolerance had been wiped away. The targeting of Christians, particularly Assyrian and Mandaean communities, towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium clearly pointed to the continuing 'unmixing' of peoples in Iraq even under the 'democratically' elected government of the newly created state. The general consensus is that Iraqis have fled their country 'as a consequence of a conflict in which they have no stake but of which they were made victims' (ICG 2008: 1).<sup>6</sup> Compounding the real threats of violence and a deadly rise in sectarian terrorist acts, countless publications emphasize the widespread impoverishment of people within Iraq after years of sanctions as an important factor prompting outmigration. Sassoon (2009; see also Marfleet 2007) highlights the dramatic decline in the numbers of doctors, academics, professionals and artists, who had been targeted and censored as groups, and who later ended up unemployed, thus choosing exile over continued suffering.

## Iraqis Redefine Migration in Search of Homes in Urban Syria

The Iraqi displacement crisis reached a critical stage a year or two into the rapidly growing violent conflict in Syria after the Arab Uprisings of 2011.<sup>7</sup> International humanitarian interest in Iraq had begun to decline. Yet the lack of security, continuing civil conflict and economic uncertainty alongside a muted 'return' policy by the current government have made it unlikely that there will be a mass Iraqi return any time soon. More likely, Iraqi exiles, refugees and displaced people will remain in neighbouring states like Syria under increasingly difficult circumstances. As their savings diminish and their circular migrations into and out of Iraq to make money or collect rents become more precarious, it is likely that Syria will become the site of permanent 'temporariness' and the base for irregular and long-distant migrations to keep in contact with family who have scattered over the face of the earth.

My brother is a naturalized American, and my mother needs a few more months to get it [American citizenship]. My brother and sister are in Canada. My uncles are in Michigan, USA. My other uncle is in Australia; my cousin is in Denmark. I keep in touch with all of them. If I am offered resettlement, I don't think I will resettle, I don't think I will take it because I am not married. And I am here with my father who is an old man. For me I think I will remain here in Syria for now [with my father]. (Samira, Damascus, 2011)

Iraqi refugees in Syria are urban-based and largely from Baghdad. This is hardly surprising, given that much of the sectarian violence in Iraq has occurred in the mixed Shiite and Sunni areas of Baghdad and other urban centres (Harper 2008). Although Syrian government records do not record religious affiliation of Iraqis entering the country, the documents of the Syrian offices of the UNHCR suggest that 57 per cent are Sunni, 20 per cent are Shiite and 16 per cent are Christian, with 4 per cent being Sabaeen-Mandean (al-Khalidi et al. 2007). The Iraqis on the whole are well educated and constitute what was Iraq's professional middle class. A large proportion of them are relying on personal savings and remittances from Iraq, though some have managed to secure employment, both formal and informal, in Syria. But many undertake risky, if brief visits to Iraq to keep their businesses operating, collect pensions and food rations or check in on elderly relatives who have refused to flee. This circular mobility is an important coping strategy for Iraqis and at first baffled the international humanitarian aid regime, which had previously regarded 'refugeeness' as a one-way road (to resettlement).

Entry into Syria has never required a visa from any Arab country, and Iraqis make full use of this 'anomaly' in international border control. It was only during a brief period between 2008 and 2010 that a more stringent

visa regime was imposed, partially at the request of the Iraqi prime minister al-Maliki, who wanted to see more control on movement into and out of Iraq (Amnesty International 2008). By 2011, the visa regime was relaxed again, and a one-month visa could be taken by Iraqis at the Syrian border then renewed in-country. This ‘open’ or tolerant visa regime has challenged the classical definition of a ‘refugee’ being completely removed from their home country. When reports from Iraq seem to suggest a reduction in targeted violence, a greater surge in circular migration re-emerges. With the reduction of violence in Iraq, there is increased movement of Iraqis who return home for some specific reason: to check on relatives, to sell their assets, to collect their pensions or to assess the security situation first-hand. Some Iraqis use this circularity of movement to find the optimal conditions for themselves and their families. One Iraqi left Iraq for Jordan and then decided to go back to Iraq to try to live there. Then he fled to Lebanon a year later. Further down the line, he left Lebanon, fearing he would be picked up by the security services as he had no papers. Now in Syria, he does not need papers, but he needs to keep his head down.

Iraq changed; it changed for the worse, not for the better . . . I am trying to forget that Iraq is my country so that I don’t ever go back. This is how I am thinking. Because honestly, I cannot live there [in Iraq] any more. (Mahmoud, Damascus, 2011)

## **International Aid and Learning Lessons from Syria**

Humanitarian aid agencies need refugees to operate. So, when Iraqis did not come forward in the expected large numbers to register for assistance from the UNHCR in Syria, the agency faced a serious crisis, if not an existential one. With no previous experience of working in Syria and with a government that had never had to struggle to assert its sovereignty vis-à-vis the international aid regime, it was not surprising that clashes of policies, social norms and culture occurred as international actors struggled to set up a meaningful presence in the country (Hoffmann 2016). Without refugees to provide protection to, many a humanitarian aid organization’s own mandate would come under scrutiny.<sup>8</sup> It can be argued that the experience in Syria with this nearly totally middle-class, urban displaced Iraqi population was the impetus and, indeed, the push that made the UNHCR rethink and rewrite its policy towards urban, self-settled refugees, seeing them no longer as ‘irregular’ as per its 1997 policy, but rather as ‘bona fide’ self-settled refugees (UNHCR 2009b). Or maybe the agency was independently considering updating its previous position regarding the self-settled refugee as somehow irregular and outside the ‘legal’ framework of its mandate. What-

ever the background, the UNHCR revised its policy and its programmes in view of the Iraqi response to displacement in Syria and in view of the demands of the Syrian government that all aid to Iraqis had also to be extended to needy Syrians. In addition to its concerted effort to create mobile teams to seek out Iraqis to register with itself, it also created Syrian and Iraqi refugee volunteer teams to provide support in local hosting community centres and community 'drop-in centres' for Iraqi and Syrians. Muna was one such UNHCR volunteer:

In our apartment building there are Syrians, Palestinians, Iraqis and Somalis. Our relationship with them is all good. We don't bother them, and they don't bother us, and we are in good communications with each other. We help each other. There is an Iraqi neighbour who was a housewife with four children, two boys and two girls. One day her husband went out to work, it was informal, as Iraqis are not supposed to work, and she received a phone call that her husband had died. Imagine, she had no one. She did not believe it and thought that it was a joke. She went to the hospital and there he was, dead. So, I helped her as a neighbour and an Iraqi. We were able to get funds to bury him through friends and the UNHCR. And she stayed for one month after that, waiting for him to come back every day at 8 p.m. I started dropping by every day at that time because she would get into a hysterical fit. But thank goodness she recovered after a few months and life goes on. Of course, she is grieving inside. That is what neighbours are for. (Muna, Damascus, 2011)

International aid agencies are tied to the conditions that donor countries impose. For Syria, this resulted in difficult barriers between the host community and the displaced Iraqis. With US sanctions, as well as conditions that its funds not be used to assist the Syrian population, Iraqi volunteers with the UNHCR expressed their discomfort at not being able to assist the Syrians living around them in the community:

I also worked with an organization called Compassion [Mahabba]. Several years ago, Syrian university students came to run a survey and I worked [with] them. We did the survey not only for Iraqis but Syrians too. We saw so many cases of destitute Syrians. We went back and asked the UNHCR to allow Syrians to come to our drop-in centres. You see, I was defending Syrians. But the organization told us that they cannot do it because they have specific criteria. (Samira, Damascus, 2011)

Despite these formal restrictions, many international aid agencies and even the UNHCR eventually began to accept discrete Syrian participation in their activities. By 2011 it was not unusual to see Syrians coming to these centres for language classes, computer access and other activities.

Between 2005 and until 2012, Syria was a haven and a refuge for over a million displaced Iraqis. And while some Iraqis have now been compelled

to move on in response to the increasing instability and armed conflict in Syria itself, a sizeable percentage of the two hundred thousand Iraqis registered with the UNHCR as of 2011 continue to receive assistance in the government-controlled areas of Syria (UNHCR 2014). More recent reports suggest that the numbers have dropped by 30–40 per cent (UNHCR 2022). Many Iraqis who remain in Syria belong to minority Christian groups such as the Assyrians and are ‘protected’ by the state. Up until the present, no mass exodus of Christian Arabs, Assyrians or other ethno-religious Syrians has fled government-controlled areas, although there is a steady outflow as minority Christian individuals and families succeed in their secondary migration aspirations, generally to Europe. Despite the brutality of the Syrian conflict and the extraordinary menace of the so-called Islamic State (IS), with its imported sectarian extremism, Syria remains a place of refuge and sanctuary. Providing asylum to the stranger is a clearly defined ideal in Syrian society, and one which is generally acted upon.

I am from Baghdad, the capital; I came in 2008 and have not gone back to Iraq since. The situation there [in Baghdad] has changed by 180 degrees. From what I hear and see the situation is hard. When we were in Baghdad there was no sectarianism. Since I came here [to Damascus] I felt safe. I always say this; and I always mention it when in meetings [with international humanitarian aid staff]: Syria has provided the Iraqi people more than any other country. Syrians have hosted us, they have given us residency permits and they have made us feel safe. There is cooperation between people. There are no problems here. We have felt safe up to now and we hope things do not change. (Samira, Damascus, 2011)

Across the country, in urban neighbourhoods, towns and villages, Syrians have opened their homes to fellow Iraqis and Syrians displaced by the conflict in nearby areas. As Zaman (2016: 5) identifies, a United Nations inter-agency survey conducted in 2013 in fifty-two neighbourhoods in the city of Aleppo found that of half a million Syrians registered as internally displaced, nearly 60 per cent of them were hosted by local charities and families. This local response to provide for the stranger is not surprising given the importance of sanctuary and generosity in Arab society. And despite the public emphasis on the Syrian Red Crescent and international agencies in the Western press, most of the humanitarian work at the local level in Syria is organized and managed by local grassroots organizations.

Many of these voluntary groups have been complemented by the dynamism of humanitarian initiatives run by the Syrian diaspora and the wider Muslim solidarity groups that have brought humanitarian help from the Middle East and Europe. The Iraqi crisis mobilized these small, fragmented, informal charitable associations and local religious organizations for Mus-

lim and Christian alike. Many had been responding previously to the crisis by focusing on the destitute and needy of the country. With the Iraqi crisis, many new groups and networks have been formed in response to local suffering (see Slim and Trombetta 2014). The director of the Middle East Council of Churches in Damascus was interviewed by Zaman and confirmed this conflation of religious with social and moral duty: 'As Syrian citizens, we have a duty to support and help the government indirectly and to alleviate, let us say, the burden and the tension; otherwise we would see people on the street starving, and this would affect our society . . . . We believe it is not only the responsibility of the humanitarian agencies but also the churches' (Zaman 2016: 160).

Such outpourings of local-level charity, compassion and support, as well as familiarity with social ideals and customs, have led many Iraqis to see their places of abode and their neighbourhoods in a familiar and familial light. Displaced Iraqis in Damascus have expressed recognition of familiarity, neighbourliness and homelike spaces in the community. Some of these have been recognized and elaborated on by agencies of the international aid regime, such as the establishment of a cohort of 'volunteer' Iraqis who seek out and assist new arrivals. As Zaman (2016:133) argues, Syria can be conceptualized as a familiar space for Iraqi forced migrants, wherein cultural practices including religious ones are sustained and realized through social and kin networks and mediated through new urban settings. In the context of Iraqi exiles in Damascus, their cultural practices can be seen as an 'emplacement' strategy in which everyday experiences of Iraqis and their engagement with religious practices are recalibrated as a practice of conviviality. And a form of quiet religious activism in the neighbourhood mosques and informal Quranic study groups for men and women has grown, perhaps because of government disinterest (Pierret 2013). Much the same occurred in Iraq under the secular dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. Thus, for Iraqi refugees these practices are important, as they affirm Damascus as a familiar space.

When we consider Iraqi displacement and forced migration to Syria, we need to conceptualize Syria as a familiar receiving space where Iraqis can belong rather than a space of isolation and alienation (Chatelard 2011). The same holds true for the major urban centres of the Levant. Damascus is perfectly described by Ulf Hannerz (1996: 13) as a city that has especially intricate internal goings on and simultaneously reaches out into the wider world. It is a city that brings the home out into the neighbourhood and refreshingly makes community ties as important as familial ones. For Iraqi refugees, the Damascene popular 'admonition' to make neighbourly ties equally important as domestic ones guarantees that the stranger or temporary guest will find comfort and ease from their distress (Zaman 2016: 145).

Damascus (and Syria in general) has occupied an important interstitial place in the region. It is where ideas, people, symbols, language, music and goods have met for centuries from the Middle East and wider world. Iraqis arriving in Damascus find themselves at home in the city and its residential quarters, as they already possess an understanding of the city and share its cognitive space.

[If] you speak to someone who is fairly comfortable [in Syria], has work and a home – he doesn't give Europe a second thought. Do you know why? He tells you that he can go to the mosque and pray at his convenience. He can hear the Adhan [call to prayer] as a Muslim. When it is Ramadan, he feels that it actually is Ramadan and the same for 'Eid. In Europe you cannot feel that it is Ramadan, 'Eid or another occasion. Isn't this something that affects a person? A Muslim is affected by such things. (Mu'tasim, quoted in Zaman 2016: 153)

## **Conclusion: Displaced Iraqis and Syrians, the Comfort of Home and Lessons Learned**

Iraqi exiles have regularly confounded the Western-based system of humanitarianism. Iraqis did not flee their country when expected to in 2003, nor have they returned at the rate assumed after 2011, when Syria descended into violent armed conflict. They have eschewed the holding centres and containment camps set up for them on barren borderlands and have instead sought refuge and hospitality from their Arab hosts in populous localities and urban centres in Syria (as well as Jordan). The Iraqi rejection of camps as a response to asylum has caught the international community off-guard and has since resulted in a significant and major rethink at the UNHCR and other refuge agencies as to how to deal with displaced, middle-class professionals who do not want to enter refugee camps. Only a few years ago, refugees who evaded camps were 'criminalized' for such acts. However, I would argue that largely because of the Iraqi crisis, in 2009 the UNHCR was forced to reconsider its policies and issue new guidelines to address the bureaucratic requirements for effectively dealing with and protecting self-settled, urban refugees. Furthermore, Iraqi circular migration became a matter of some concern, as traditionally within UNHCR policy guidelines a refugee's return to their place of origin (even if only temporarily) ended their refugee status. Among Iraqis, this policy needed to be reconsidered and revised. Post-2011, when Syrians were displaced by the armed conflict in their own country, they followed the same patterns of movement that Iraqis had previously. They avoided refugee camps in the neighbouring states, preferring to self-settle in urban centres where many had pre-existing kinship ties and social and economic networks. The same norms of duty and



hospitality that the world saw in Syria were enacted in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. And the significance of circularity of movement was also made clear.

The history of Syria as a host state has had a significant impact on how Iraqi exiles and their hosts have been able to reject the contemporary Western notion of the separation of the stranger or asylum seeker from the rest of society. These acts have a resonance and clarity with the historical context of the late Ottoman era and its system of *millet* communities spread far and wide over the Arab provinces. With the collapse of the Ottoman empire and the imposition of British and French mandates in the post-First World War years, migration, forced and voluntary, has characterized the region, creating widespread and large-scale networks of families, lineages and tribes across postcolonial borders.

The considerations of social capital, networks and alliances then became significant when Iraqis came to deciding the time, the place and the route to flee. In addition, notions of hospitality and refuge operated at the individual and community level – not by government decree. The granting of hospitality was seen not only as a public good but also an act that enhanced the host's reputation. These social and ethical norms underpinned the success of Iraqi self-settlement and local community hosting in Syria. They were later played out again when displaced Syrians sought refuge in neighbouring states.

Humanitarian aid policy needs to be responsive to local contexts and lessons need to be learned. The Iraqi case in Syria (as well as Jordan) was a precursor to the way that displaced Syrians were received in neighbouring states where, again, duty outweighed a human rights approach to asylum. These lessons from Iraq and later from Syria need to be learned and not regarded as in some way *sui generis*. Indications are that, indeed, the humanitarian aid regime has learned from these experiences. Self-settlement of refugees in urban and peri-urban areas of host countries has become recognized as acceptable, as has the greater involvement of the local hosting community both in the provision of care and in the sharing of opportunities. Even circular migration to check on family and businesses in countries of origin has come to be tolerated as an acceptable act among refugees, even those registered with the UNHCR.

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## Notes

1. For example, Michel Aflaq, the Syrian political philosopher who was a major player in the founding of the Syrian Ba'ath Party, went into exile in Iraq in the mid-1960s and became an important figure in the Iraqi Ba'ath Party.
2. Within the Ottoman *millet* system, Muslims, for example, might be ethnically and linguistically Turks, Arabs, Kurds, Albanians, Bosnians, Circassians or others. Jews might be Sephardic, the descendants of those who had been given refuge, or Mizrahi, Bukhari or Oriental Jews. The Christians were mainly Orthodox and might identify as Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians (in the Balkans) or Arabs (in Palestine and Syria). The individual *millet* community self-governed its internal affairs. Intercommunity relations gave rise to a broad range of social networks far beyond the specific geographical territory of the immediate community, especially among the professional and commercial classes.
3. In much the same way, the US president George Bush and British prime minister Tony Blair's advisors had expected the Iraqi people to welcome British and American troops with flowers and sweets in 2003.
4. The British were awarded the southern region of *Bilad al-Sham*, Palestine, under the League of Nations mandate. On the overthrow of King Faysal of Syria in July 1920 by French troops, he was given a consolation prize by the British and installed as the King of Iraq. Another of his brothers, Prince Abdullah, arrived in Ma'an in November 1920 and was recognized by the British as the Emir of Trans-Jordan and added to their British-mandated territory.
5. Popular uprisings against British and French colonialism commenced in the 1920s with the Arab Revolt and continued for decades thereafter. The Arab nationalism expressed in contemporary political parties such as the Syrian National Party (*Hizb Al Qawmi Al Surie*) and the Ba'ath Party (*Hizb Al Ba'ath*) are the ongoing political expressions of that desire to remain united in a Greater Syria or unified Arab state (Provence 2005; Neep 2012).
6. The reference here is to the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was unprovoked in the minds of many Iraqis. The search for weapons of mass destruction was a Western construction later shown to be an empty goal.
7. The interviews in this section were conducted by me between March and May, 2011 in Damascus, Syria.
8. Hoffmann clearly articulates this dilemma in her description of the first few international humanitarian aid organizations permitted to enter Syria in the mid-2000s. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) saw Iraqis in Syria as troubled and in desperate need of the world's attention, victims of sexual violence and in need of psychosocial trauma counselling. The Danish Refugee Council, furthermore, regarded the Iraqis in Syria as being in great difficulty due to their illegal status and the notion that criminality and prostitution of their young women had created resentment with local hosting community. These assumptions were just that; they were not derived from any empirical studies. Rather they emerged from the imaginings of the international humanitarian aid workers (Hoffmann 2016: 103–5).

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