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From One War to Another Iraqi Emigration to Jordan

GÉRALDINE CHATELARD

Jordan has been a particularly interesting location to observe the trends, patterns and dynamics of long-term emigration from Iraq over the last period of Baathist rule. Between the 1991 Gulf War and the fall of Saddam Hussein, circulation between Iraq and all its other neighbours officially stopped periodically, whereas the flow of people, goods and capital never ceased across the border with Jordan, which remained Iraq's primary economic partner. The Jordanian authorities granted Iraqis almost unconditional entry; they allowed Iraqi international businessmen and cross border traders to skirt the embargo by using Amman as a base, tolerated the presence of the Iraqi intelligence services, and even admitted Iraqi opponents as long as they were not active politically. While airports in Iraq were closed due to the embargo,

Jordan was the gateway to the outside world—not only for the Iraqi business and political elite who were travelling internationally, but also for the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi exiles who left the Middle East over that period.

In Jordan 'refugee' is an extremely loaded term, and a legal, social and political category that is almost exclusively the preserve of Palestinians. Neither in the law, nor in collective representations is there space to consider the Iraqis as refugees, and very few Jordanian civil society structures have undertaken assistance programmes for this group. The country is party to no international legal instrument relating to non-Palestinian refugees and has devised no domestic framework for asylum granting. It is the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) who is locally charged with the task of determining refugee status and the

subsequent resettlement of refugees to a third country, usually in the West. In this context, what have been the large Iraqi community members' livelihood strategies in Jordan, and how has the Jordanian non-policy towards them affected their migration trends over the last 12 years?

Patterns of the 1990s

The number of Iraqis who have come to Jordan since 1991 and not returned to Iraq, either staying in the Hashimite Kingdom or transiting it, could be as high as 1.5 million. Before 1996, there were roughly 100,000 Iraqi residents in Jordan; most recently, there were about 350,000. Just before the April 2003 US and British military intervention only 30,000 of them were legally permanent residents, while another 10,000 to 15,000 were temporary circular migrants. This left over 300,000 Iraqi exiles, 5,000 to 7,000 of whom were either asylum seekers or refugees under the mandate of the UNHCR. The rest had mostly overstayed their 6-month temporary visit permits and were remaining clandestinely. Since the Gulf War, this group has been in constant re-composition. New individuals keep arriving from Iraq, while others leave Jordan to immigrate to countries further afield. There is, however, a stable core of legal and long-term illegal residents, the latter having found the connections and protection that allow them to eke out a living in the informal sectors of the economy and to avoid expulsion back to Iraq.

During the early 1990s, mass emigration from Iraq took place mainly in the direction of Iran, in response to the repression that followed the so-called Shiite and Kurdish uprisings of 1991. Iran generally granted Iraqis refugee status in one form or another, if not always the prospects of local integration.¹ Those who came to Amman with a view to staying long-term consciously chose Jordan over Iran, a land with which they had no political and often no religious affinity. Their decision to leave mostly stemmed from a serious feeling of insecurity: a dramatic drop in their standard of living ensuing from the deteriorating economic situation, sometimes coupled with harassment by the authorities. These emigrants were among the most educated, starting the brain drain the regime feared, and against which disincentive measures were soon adopted: passport and exit fees were raised and family members left behind were often harassed. These high costs reinforced the self-selective effects of migration by penalizing the less well off or those who were unable to mobilize cross border and/or transnational social networks.

As a result, one category of migrants came to Jordan with the aim of activating family reunification schemes with the help of foreign embassies and the office of the UNHCR in Amman. Canada, Australia and the USA initially granted a number of immigration visas, as sponsorship schemes for humanitarian refugees existed in most of these countries. All these options favoured those who already had close relatives in Western countries, or who were members of communities long-established in such countries and who could use communal associations as sponsors. This was especially widespread among members of the various Christian denominations.

Another important group was that of professionals who were initially in demand in Jordan. Engineers, doctors, university professors and artists were generally able to find employment in Amman, and were granted residency and work permits. At a time when they could improve their situation by integrating into the existing Jordanian job market, that was the option many selected over attempting a dubious legal or clandestine migration to a Western country, even when considering the good chances of being granted refugee status. Only a marginal number of exiles approached the Amman office of the UNHCR. Most feared its infiltration by the Iraqi intelligence, which would mean insecurity for those left behind. But as early as 1994 it had become almost impossible to find legal employment in Jordan and most Western countries had stopped granting immigration visas, with many having adopted more restrictive measures on family reunification. Until 1998 very limited possibilities for leaving Jordan remained; one could negotiate a work contract with Yemen, Libya or Sudan which were short on professionals, an option that tended to appeal more to Sunnis than to Shiites or Christians. For the majority of Iraqi exiles in Jordan the only alternative to staying was to attempt clandestine migration, mainly to Western Europe. To meet this demand, a market for services to skirt border control policies developed in Amman, the high costs again favouring those who could access financial capital.²

Migration networks

Social networks were called upon to help meet the costs of both life in Jordan and of clandestine migration. Iraqi Christians approached the many well-established churches in Jordan. Religious solidarity was mobilized to find housing, work, to receive assistance, to access free

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medical services, or to register children in Christian schools. Jordanian parish priests interceded to prevent deportation back to Iraq, and to support visa applications or refugee claims. According to their individual inclinations and the available social identities, other migrants tried to reach out to comrades in the Jordanian Communist Party, to professional associations, to fellow artists, to religious based Sunni charities, or to the few notables of Iraqi origin whose families had become well established in Jordan after the 1958 overthrow of the Hashimite monarchy in Baghdad. These relations provided Iraqis locally unconnected by kinship ties with an entry into the patron-client structure that is one of the driving forces of Jordanian society and through which work and housing could be found. To meet the costs of long-distance emigration, individuals indebted themselves to relatives or close friends scattered all over the world. When the move was planned in advance, part or all of the costs were gathered in Iraq, usually by selling properties. This entailed decision-making involving the whole household, and often even an extended family. Strategic choices were made as to which country to aim for, who should go first, and who should stay in custody of properties. The subsequent reunion of all family members was also carefully planned. Originally, exile migrants to Jordan were mostly working-age males. But as their stays in Jordan were prolonged, many wives joined their husbands together with their children. Later, women came whose husbands were already in the West and who had either asked for family reunification, or had gathered enough money to pay for the rest of the family's clandestine journey.

Shiite exiles

The year 1996 marked a turning point in the patterns of Iraqi exile migration to Jordan. In Iraq, a major wave of repression hit the Shiite religious establishment and any individuals who were suspected of being pro-Iranian. Thousands who would have turned to Iran for asylum were willing to flee Iraq. But crossing into the Islamic Republic had become extremely dangerous now that the state-sponsored drainage of the Southern Marches—the traditional passageway of refugees into Iran—was almost complete and the border area heavily mined. Prospective migrants thus looked to Jordan, albeit aware that they would not be received as refugees, and that their sectarian affiliation and pro-Iranian inclinations would be problematic. Self-asserting Shiites were very much alien to Sunni or Christian Jordanians. No provisions in Jordanian law allowed for the development of Shiite communal institutions such as mosques; the Iranian Revolution was a model for no local political current, and official relations with Iran were cold if not openly tense.

Because of the usual financial constraints, those Iraqi Shiites who finally made it to Jordan were once again members of the educated middle class. They rarely had high financial assets, but expected their educational and professional capital to be negotiable on the official Jordanian job market. They soon found that the professional sectors were saturated, and that, without relations on which to rely, it was extremely difficult to find even petty jobs, cheap and decent housing, and to access a number of basic services. Confronted with what they saw as unacceptable living conditions, the most well off did not stay long in Jordan. They were ready to pay to reach the UK, which hosted the largest Iraqi exile community in the West, and where Shiite institutions were well developed. The rest of these migrants, having exhausted their savings on their exit and on their stay in Jordan within a few months, experienced a sharp social downfall and what they sensed as religious discrimination. Devoid of legal rights, including those of practising their religion collectively or of getting married, divorced or buried according to their rite, many now also lived well below the poverty line in extremely poor housing and unsanitary conditions, when they had once been among the intellectual elite of their communities. They thus deeply resented having to live side by side the lowest strata of Jordanian society. Unable to work legally, many had to compete with unskilled Egyptians on the informal labour market. Within a couple of years, a process similar to the one experienced by the earlier wave of Iraqi exiles took place. Wives and children joined men and specialized travel agents offered their services from Amman to Western countries.

The difference this time around was that pioneer Iraqi Shiites had been being accepted legally in North America, Northern Europe and Aus-

tralia as resettled refugees since 1992. So those unsatisfied with their lot in Jordan could now contact their kin who had stable legal status and better economic conditions abroad. The latter thus sent funds to the former, and a chain migration and worldwide dispersal of Iraqi Shiites was then fuelled; this was in contrast to the previous waves of Shiite migrants that had largely been absorbed into Iran.

Iraqi Shiites also managed to locally develop their own support networks based on sectarian ties, although these groups never fully recreated a structured community. Small-scale religious gatherings regularly took place, scattered across various neighbourhoods in Amman, each headed by a member of the clergy, often a young theology student able to access resources within the worldwide Shiite community.

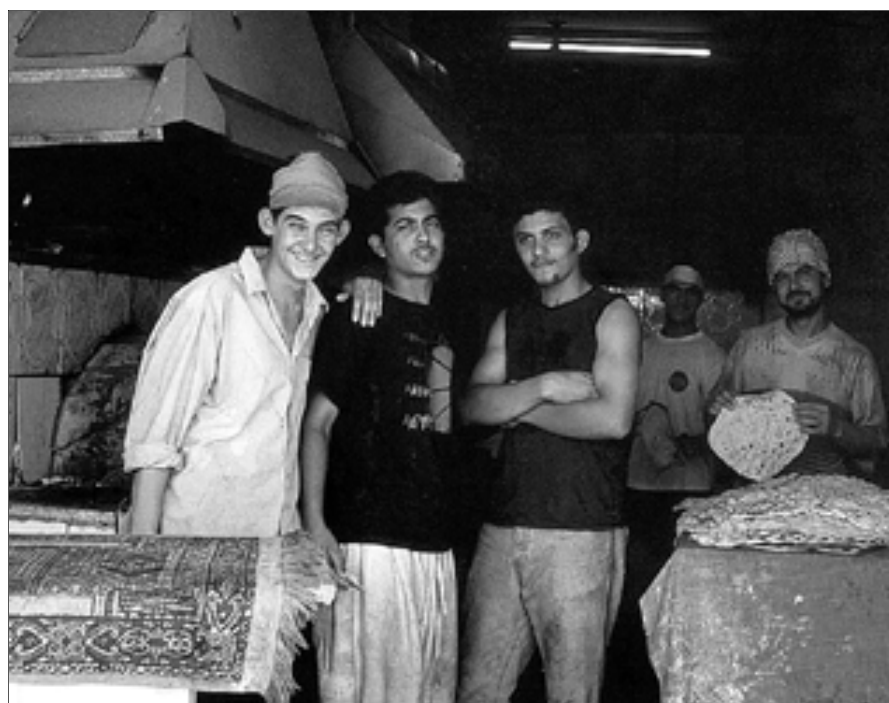


PHOTO: YVES HANOTIAU, [HTTP://WWW.SKIOUROS.NET](http://www.skiourous.net)

On a spiritual level, these gatherings gave a religious sense to members' collective experiences as marginalized exiles. On a practical level, they allowed for the exchange of information regarding the situation in Iraq, livelihood opportunities in Jordan, and the possibility of further emigration. Finally, they acted as financial support networks to cover the costs of migration to the West, generally to the UK, which in some cases served as a last step before finally reaching Iran.

Iraqi Bakers in Amman, Jordan

The recent regime change in Iraq has prompted a new category of Iraqis to envision their futures abroad, those belonging to the layer of the middle and upper middle class that was associated with the previous regime and which has capital. Jordan is again the main regional pole of this emigration, from where Western Europe—if not post-9/11 North America—remains accessible, and where work contracts can be negotiated again with Libya and Yemen to replace those Iraqis who now think of returning. A limited trend of return migration is already perceptible, in which Jordan is the last step before getting back to Iraq to explore the possibilities of long-term return or the mere re-establishment of economic or social ties. Now that Iraqi migration has had ample time to gain a transnational dimension, it is likely that chain migration through Jordan will continue until families are reconstituted away from the Middle East, or until families reverse the direction of their migration and reunite within Iraq.

Notes

1. See B. Rajaei, 'The Politics of Refugee Policy in Post-Revolutionary Iran', *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 54, n°1 (2000), p. 44–63.
2. For more on clandestine migration see Géraldine Chatelard, 'Jordan as a transit country: Semi-protectionist immigration policies and their effects on Iraqi forced migrants', *New Issues in Refugee Research*, n°61 (2002).

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