

**“Between Iraq and a Hard Place”: Urban Governance and Transnational Laboratories of Intervention of Displaced Iraqis in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon**

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**ABSTRACT:** The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 has given life to new forms of political, economic and social realities in the region. As a result of the military and sectarian violence, it is estimated that more than 4.7 million people have been displaced internally and externally, making the current crisis a ‘humanitarian disaster.’ This essay represents work in progress—a reflection on field notes and observations—of an ongoing research project on the post-American-invasion displacement of Iraqi communities in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. It focus on government and NGO-sponsored humanitarian interventions to highlight the various processes of urban governance emerging in the wake of the ‘surge’ of the Iraqi refugee crisis in these countries. The essay explores the emerging biopolitical technologies and strategies negotiating the governance of the displaced and producing new social realities in different urban settings. The essay does not attempt to draw large conclusions, but rather sketches a cartography of how various states and humanitarian agencies are responding to different notions of national and transnational (in)security, while dealing with the crisis of displaced Iraqis, and to pose a set of questions as to what the implications of this might be.

The American intervention and promise of ‘liberating’ and ‘democratizing’ Iraq has turned the country into an international front of fighting against terrorism and has thrown it into an imminent civil war. The American invasion in 2003, the emerging sectarian violence in many cities in Iraq and the subsequent security plan for Baghdad after the 2007 military surge have given life to new forms of political, economic and social realities in the region. In Baghdad, major demographic transformations have impacted the city itself, drawing both physical and imaginary ethno-sectarian lines between the various neighborhoods (Gregory 2008). As a result of the military and sectarian violence, it is estimated that more than 4.7 million people have been displaced internally and externally, making the current crisis a ‘humanitarian disaster’ (BBC 2007). The United Nations has recognized the displacement of Iraqis as a ‘silent crisis’ and one of the largest displacements in the region since the 1948 Palestinian refugees crisis (UNHCR 2007). Most of the 2 millions who are externally displaced have settled within the capital cities of Jordan and Syria, as well as other regional countries like Lebanon and Egypt. The specificity of this growing refugee crisis is marked by the absence of ‘visible’ territorial spaces that confine

the growing number of Iraqis moving both legally and illegally into these countries. Reflecting their urban origins, many Iraqis have refused to be settled in camps and have sought refuge in urban and neighborhood settings. Drawing on its experiences in the region, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has also opposed establishing camps, arguing that they are costly and might become permanent (Peteeet 2007). As a result, most of the displaced have slowly moved into various cities' neighborhoods, creating enclaves identified as 'little Baghdad', changing the socio-demographics of these cities and giving rise to new geo-political and social realities. Under the rubric of 'responsibility to protect,'<sup>1</sup> this crisis has triggered the flow of aid money to the region, giving rise to various humanitarian projects experimenting with the specificity of this crisis. Aid money is flowing from both American and European sources creating humanitarian markets for recruitments of both international and local 'experts' and mobilizing and reviving local and international NGO's in the region. With difficulties to confine the movement of the displaced within camps or well-defined spaces, the massive population movement, mobility and dispersion of Iraqis, have created a major challenge for governance. Aimed at urban governance, local and western governments, as well as the various international and local organizations have been mobilized to contain and manage these new realities producing complex forms of interventions—military, state, and humanitarian. Several questions emerge here concerning the complexity of these various interventions and the way they have been interacting: What kind of mechanisms, strategies and technologies of governance are emerging to manage, such uncontained displaced populations? Where are the effects of these processes of governmentality being directed and what are they attempting to govern? How can these different *dispositifs* of power be linked to larger global and transnational spaces and discourses of governance and security? What kind of emerging forms of subjectification and citizenships are being negotiated during these processes?

Following Michel Foucault, Michael Dillon argues that the problematic of government in the modern age is not uniform or homogenous, rather it is "a diverse, heterogeneous and dynamic topology of power in which complexes of problems continuously emerge" (Dillon 2007: 42). Governmentality becomes not only concerned with the issue of 'policing,' as the 'reason of State,' but also with the biopolitics of subjects and populations being governed. This notion of governmentality not only destabilizes the understanding of sovereignty in terms of the

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<sup>1</sup> See: (Weiss 2004; Pandolfi 2008)

nation-state and life and death (Foucault 2007), but moves to the management of the politics and the contingencies of ‘life itself,’ where the “vital reality of a people, must become the overriding responsibility and criterion that should guide the exercise of political authority” (Rose 2001).<sup>2</sup> In this era of global governance and transnational movement of people and goods, governmentality becomes not only a problematic of the state, but rather a decentralized process where transnational actors play a crucial role. It is argued that humanitarian interventionism, as part of a transnational mobile network of deployment of people, ideologies and markets has become the link between transnational forms of domination and local political practices.<sup>3</sup> These transnational actors are tightly linked to military interventions, as cases in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Lebanon attest. The presence of these transnational actors, equipped with their ideologies, practices and projects are forms of ‘laboratories of intervention,’ effecting the realities of the local life in many of these sites (Pandolfi 2008). Perceived as ‘apolitical’ and ‘neutral’, these transnational actors, with varying interests and ideological backgrounds, are in constant negotiations with state institutions. In Lebanon, for example, the UNHCR hired a legal representative to negotiate with the Ministry of Interior the release of Iraqi refugees detained by the Lebanese government, who like other regional governments are not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention Doctrine.<sup>4</sup> This represents a legal paradox where humanitarian agencies, function under an international mandate in sovereign states whose law does not recognize that same mandate. Humanitarian interventions, through transnational actors and various laboratories of intervention, become political actors in the process, whose concern becomes managing life of the displaced. For displaced Iraqis, this has given rise to new forms of social realities, through which their new form of citizenship in these transitory urban settings is governed through the multiplicity and contingency of local and transnational biopolitical interventions.

In the wake of the 2003 invasion, the United States, Britain and many countries in Europe dropped Iraq from the list of countries whose citizens are eligible for asylum. Western countries tried to “promote a brighter interpretation of the situation in Iraq and the displacement crisis to justify their lack of response” (Amnesty International 2008). Many asylum applications in

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<sup>2</sup> On the notion of “life itself” see also: (Rose 2006)

<sup>3</sup> See (Pandolfi 2002a; 2002b; 2008)

<sup>4</sup> The 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear,” is unwilling to return. (UNHCR 1951).(Pandolfi 2002a)

Western countries were denied, and individuals and families were returned back to Iraq (Frelick 2007). This ‘state of denial’ became an embarrassment for the American and the British governments when up to 100,000 of Iraqis were crossing the border to Jordan and Syria every month in search of security and better economic conditions. Eventually, in 2007, the United Nations urged western governments to take responsibility by increasing humanitarian aid and the resettlement of Iraqi refugees. After being shamed for not taking action, the United States has become the country absorbing the largest number of Iraqi refugees. This resettlement is being managed through UNHCR regional offices in the Middle East, which are responsible for documenting refugees and presenting their cases to Western countries for resettlement. Though it is not a declared government policy, the United States has been conducting resettlement through a process of social and political ‘triage,’ where refugees are being sorted through their ethnic, sectarian and social backgrounds. According to informants in the region, religious and professional background are playing crucial role in the selection criteria. The US has mainly focused on resettling Iraqi professionals, especially medical doctors and engineers, as well as, Christians and Sunnis, mostly from middle-class and upper-middle-class families. Some Iraqi Shi’a or those of mixed backgrounds are claiming or emphasizing being of Sunni backgrounds to facilitate their resettlement. The process of resettlement and reallocation has also favored women who are labeled as ‘heads of household’, as they are identified as more ‘vulnerable’ and stand a better chance of having their applications expedited. Many men with any form of military training are being rejected or delayed for being a ‘security liability’ for the US.<sup>5</sup> This form of ‘triage’ has created major social problems and shifts in the social dynamics within displaced Iraqi families. According to NGO workers in Syria and Lebanon, divorce rates in Iraqi communities have risen. Iraqi couples are deciding to file divorce after being rejected for asylum. This is caused by the fact that many women are requesting divorce, blaming their husbands for not being able to secure the livelihood of their families. In other cases, couples are deciding to go willingly through divorce as a formality to allow for the wife to reapply for asylum as “head of household” increasing the family’s chances of being accepted for resettlement to secure the future of their children in western countries.

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<sup>5</sup> Military conscription in Iraq is mandatory and many men had served in the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) and the First and Second Gulf Wars 1991 and 2003.

Meanwhile, the large number of displaced Iraqis was creating a local political embarrassment to the regional 'host' governments, raising various security concerns. In Syria, many neighborhoods have witnessed a large influx of Iraqis. One of the neighborhoods that I visited during my fieldwork was *Jaramana*, located about 20 minutes cab ride south of downtown Damascus. The neighborhood had been witnessing a major transformation with the movement and resettlement of many Iraqi families, mostly coming from middle class urban backgrounds. The neighborhood, which is known for its Christian and Druz working- and middle-class population, has become an attraction for Iraqis from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. In the past years, many Iraqis have opened small businesses in the neighborhood. Walking today in *Jaramana*'s main street, one cannot help but notice the large number of shops, internet cafés, restaurants serving Iraqi food, and travel agents running taxi services from Syria to Iraq. Many of these shops carry very specific Iraqi names, which in an attempt to preserve the 'Syrianness' of the neighborhood, the government forced shop owners to change these names or at least hide them. There has been also a rise of property and rent values in Syria in reaction to the high demand from Iraqis seeking to find apartments. The number of crimes has risen by 20% in areas with Iraqi population concentration, reflecting the major social and economic problems facing the displaced (Al-Miqdad 2007). The Syrian public has also linked the rise in prostitution during the last few years to the influx of Iraqi refugees, whose conditions are forcing many families to push their daughters to work in this field. The sex work industry is managed through the increasing numbers of nightclubs, which are linked to local and international sex traffickers.<sup>6</sup>

Faced with these social and economic realities the Syrian and Jordanian governments have attempted to curb the number of Iraqis entering their countries, as well as limit their mobility. Both Jordan and Syria had previously allowed Iraqis to enter without visas. For Syria, any citizen of an Arab country (including Iraqis) was allowed a free-of-charge tourist visa at the port of entry. In the last few months Syria has started to charge Iraqis a 50\$ entry fee in a desperate attempt to curb the number of those crossing the border everyday. Even public health care, which was provided free to Iraqis, now has become fee-for-service. For those who cannot afford the cost, UNHCR services are available free of charge, only for those who are registered as refugees with the agency. In Jordan, the government has started requiring pre-issued visas

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<sup>6</sup> The main clienteles being local Syrians, rich Iraqis in Syria and the growing number of sex tourists flocking from the Gulf States.

from Iraqis, obtained usually from the Jordanian embassy in Iraq. Also the Jordanian government has made it very difficult for Iraqis to renew their stay in the country, in an attempt to force Iraqis to return back to Iraq or find another country to move to. Jordan—a country with a Sunni majority—has also become more selective with whom it allows into its borders. A systematic process to exclude Shi'as from entering the country is crystallizing at the border when Iraqis are being asked to identify their religion and sect at the port of entry. This also reflects the growing anti-Shi'a sectarian sentiment rising in Jordan and the region, following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the rise of Shi'a to political power in the country.

In the case of Lebanon, which 'hosts' around 50,000 displaced Iraqis—of which only around 11,000 are registered with the UNHCR, Iraqi families have moved into various neighborhoods and ghettos in the city of Beirut and Mount Lebanon. The resistance to register with the UNHCR is believed by many Iraqis to render them visible to the Lebanese authorities. The majority of the refugees come from a Christian and Shi'a backgrounds. Christians are usually hosted by the various local Christian organizations in the country, while the majority of the Shi'a have found refuge in the Palestinian camp of Burj al-Barajna and in al-Dhahiya, a Hizbollah- controlled ghetto in the southern suburb of Beirut. Both of these places are out of control of the Lebanese government and represent a 'perfect' refuge from the government's ongoing detention and deportation of Iraqis in the country. Various international organizations, which flooded the country in the wake of the 2006 Israeli bombing of Lebanon and the conflict of the Lebanese military with Fath-al-Islam militants in northern Lebanon, have now established different projects to cater for displaced Iraqi families.<sup>7</sup> These projects have focused on providing aid, health care, social support, education for Iraqi children and youth, development of English language skills and computer literacy. These projects also emphasize the need of self-help through various local and cultural resources available and the creation of recreational activities. These interventions are meant to prepare the children and their families to a life in their future host countries, as well as deal with the current social and economic demands of daily life in Lebanon. The production of reports on the situation of displaced Iraqis by various organizations has become another important phenomenon in the complex production of biopolitical strategies. These reports have highlighted the effect of violence and displacement on trauma among the

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<sup>7</sup> Some of these NGO's include Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Save the Children and International Organization for Migration (IOM), in addition to local organizations, such as Caritas, Amel, and the Chaldean Christian organizations.

Iraqi population. The reports use a technical language of psychosocial distress and interventionism, which has become part of the production of certain forms of knowledge and expertise. Reducing personal and collective experiences and histories of violence, these reports use terms like 'impact', 'rebound' and 'coping', where individuals are seen to fit in one of these phases of psychosocial distress. This common language and the production of this form of knowledge plays an important role in activating and attracting various forms of aid and funding from donor agencies, which in turn translate to further interventions and projects.

It is clear from this topology of governance that both states and humanitarian interventions interact in many complex ways, regardless of interests and ideological backgrounds. Through examining the micro-physics of power and its effects on the displaced, one can see a machinery of governance developing across these heterogeneous and transnational spaces. States' interventions have aimed at managing displacement and population mobility within the territoriality of the nation-state through a process of 'triage,' limiting entry and exit, access to public services and deciding who is more fit for resettlement. This performance of state sovereignty on the political life of the displaced and his/her right as a citizen has produced a multiplicity of heterogeneous, yet complementary, humanitarian interventions, which focuses on the management of the everyday and the vitality of 'life itself' of the displaced in the urban setting. Even though these processes might appear separate from each other, they converge in their effect in managing a displaced population in a complex urban environment.

As Iraqis are facing imprisonment and deportation, as well as more and more strict regulations, these urban settings have become both transitory and transnational zones or corridors of governmentality. Many families are currently stuck in these transitory spaces, which have become laboratories of interventions, awaiting the possibility to be resettled or 'naturalized' in a 'host' country in the west. Many Iraqis in their transitory exile are debating their future (im)mobility, while at the same time negotiating their everyday realities of harsh economic situations and humiliating political conditions.

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