



HAL
open science

Iraqi Migrants' Impact on a City. The Case of Damascus (2006-2010)

Kamel Dorai, Martine Zeuthen

► **To cite this version:**

Kamel Dorai, Martine Zeuthen. Iraqi Migrants' Impact on a City. The Case of Damascus (2006-2010). Raymond Hinnebusch; Tina Zintl. Syria from reform to revolt. Volume 1, Political economy and international relations, Syracuse University Press, pp.250-265, 2015, Modern intellectual and political history in the Middle East, 978-0-8156-3377-8. halshs-01103573

HAL Id: halshs-01103573

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01103573v1>

Submitted on 6 Aug 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

12. Iraqi migrants' impact on a city: the case of Damascus (2006-2011)

Kamel Dorai and Martine Zeuthen

1. Introduction

Blocks of flats under construction, pressure on the infrastructure and crowded public spaces can be found all over Damascus. However, during the last years of the 2000s specific areas underwent particularly intense developments. These were mainly linked to internal and international migration movements. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the conflict in Iraq was ongoing and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were forced to leave their country and moved in great numbers to Syria. The vast majority of the Iraqis come from the main cities in Iraq, and especially from Baghdad, and they settled in the suburbs of the Syrian capital.

Reports and conversations tell that the current uprising in Syria has affected some Iraqi groups in Damascus such as in the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk, where heavy fights occurred. However some of the Iraqi and Palestinian/Iraqi dominated areas are under tighter control and surveillance. For Syrians as well as for the refugees the situation influences the people in least stable situations the most. Because the market is becoming more and more limited and movements have become further restricted, some of the Iraqis are running out of money, and that may force a number of them to migrate again, either back to Iraq, the rest of the Levant or illegally into Europe. Some refugee families who cannot leave concentrate in safest neighbourhoods such as Jaramana. Assistance decreased dramatically and they face very hard difficulties to survive.

Based on an in-depth examination of change in areas with a high concentration of Iraqi refugees as well as the personal itineraries of Iraqi refugees, this paper sets out to explore how everyday life in Damascus has been changing. By looking into the public spaces and how areas previously seen as small villages expanded and became an integrated part of the city, the article points to the important linkages between migration and urban development in contemporary Damascus.

Neither Syria nor the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have opened camps to accommodate the Iraqi refugees. Therefore they sought living quarters in the suburbs of Damascus and became one of the largest group of urban refugees throughout the world. Damascus has a long experience of hosting refugees and forcibly displaced population such as the Palestinians, Syrians from the Golan and Lebanese. After 2006 Damascus became a safe haven for Iraqis who had fled from violence and extremely difficult living conditions in Iraq. Most of them lived in Damascus but hoped for asylum elsewhere. In addition to these refugees, Damascus became a major destination for Shia pilgrims mainly coming from Iraq and Iran. Tens of thousands of Iraqis lived in or transited through Syria in the decade after the Iraq war.

These different migrations, be it temporary or long-lasting, deeply transformed neighbourhoods of the city. The Iraqis, here labelled as *urban refugees*, settled all over the city. However, some areas were more intensely inhabited by the arriving Iraqis, some of which became known as mainly Iraqi, such as Sayda Zaynab and Jaramana. These are the urban refugee areas that are the focus of this article. The article strives to analyse the role of migrants in recent urban development of Damascus' underprivileged suburbs.

The data analysed in this article was collected by the two researchers during fieldwork over a period of time from 2006-2009, and therefore information about the situation after that time is limited and gathered from phone calls with organisations still in Syria assisting the refugees and other reports available. Both researchers carried out ethnographic data collection through participant observation of everyday life in various households, as well as undertaking structured and semi structured interviews with a number of interlocutors of different genders, age, religious background and geographic origin. In this article these data are combined with accessible statistical data from organisations such as the UNHCR.

2. Iraqi refugees and the urbanisation process in Damascus

Developing countries, whether signatories of the Geneva Convention or not, tend to promote temporary reception policies toward refugees, keeping them in temporary statuses. Thus, they are often considered as temporary guests who have to return to their country of origin once the causes of their departure have disappeared, whether it is insecurity, civil war, or persecutions (Fábos et Kibreab, 2007, Kagan, 2007). Syria developed such a policy regarding Iraqis by offering them a temporary status of guest based on touristic visa regulations. However, contrary to the policies implemented in numerous developing countries to accommodate refugees in specific areas such as camps, Syria opted - as did Jordan, Egypt or Lebanon- to allow the free settlement of the Iraqis in the main cities of the country.

As a non-signatory of the UN refugee conventions Syria dealt with the refugees in its own way. The regime permitted UNHCR to work in the

country as long as it followed a special cooperation agreement. Similar restrictions concerned the 14 NGOs who were given permission to work in Syria to assist the Iraqi refugees. This unique situation led to a haphazard, even contradictory categorisation of the refugees: they are accepted by the regime but not recognised as refugees, however they registered with UNHCR as refugees and they could be enrolled in the refugee resettlement system. Their situation and the unique categorisation system influenced the conditions and context for refugees' lives in Damascus which was characterized by a feeling of temporality. Though the official way of dealing with the refugees implied temporality, the refugee presence was, as we will argue in this paper, seemed over time to become more permanent.

2. 1. Refugees as drivers of urban development

Migration is a key issue in most of the Middle Eastern countries affected by both a high rate of emigration and increasing immigration. Due to political instability, the region has experienced one the highest refugee and internally displaced population in the world, mainly constituted by Palestinians and Iraqis. These migrant populations are mostly living in diverse urban settings in Cairo, Amman, Beirut or Damascus. The urban population in these cities increased from one quarter of the total population in the 1950s to over 60% in 2005. Migrants - domestic and international, forced or not - are one of the main factors in this urban development (Al-Ali, 2004; Fargues, 2009; Tabutin&Schoumaker, 2005).

Refugee movements are generally long-lasting and the end of conflicts is not always followed by a wave of return of the entire refugee population. The more or less permanent settlement of refugee populations in

neighbouring countries generates deep changes of entire neighbourhoods. Therefore it is here argued that refugees should not be considered only as recipients of humanitarian assistance, waiting for an eventual return or resettlement in a third country, but also as actors who contribute, through their initiatives and coping strategies, to the development of the cities that host them. As mentioned by Catherine Brun

"The here and now should also be present when analysing situations of forced migration. Though many refugees and migrants feel that they live, or want to live, their lives elsewhere, they have a present life, where they need to survive, to make their livelihood, and thus through their actions construct the place where they are physically present" (Brun, 2001: 19).

Most of the southern suburbs of Beirut are example of how areas change following migration: they were constituted by Palestinian refugees in 1948 and later by internally displaced Lebanese originating from south Lebanon (Clerc, 2006). Two Palestinian refugee camps were surrounded by large neighbourhoods where internally displaced Lebanese from South Lebanon settled after the Israeli invasions in 1978 and 1982. Shia Lebanese, who were mostly living in rural regions of Lebanon, became city dwellers. Also cities like Amman experienced deep urban changes with the arrival of 300,000 Palestinians expelled from Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion in 1990. The Western part of Amman witnessed a massive and rapid change after the arrival of this new population who brought with them money to build houses but also the way of life they had in the Gulf countries. New restaurants, cafés and shopping malls opened (Van Hear, 2005).

The same tendency was to be found in Damascus, where some neighbourhoods were profoundly transformed by the settlement of refugees. The urban development of Damascus was driven partly on the arrival of new migrant populations. These contained both internal Syrian migrants as well as the influx of migrants from abroad, who settle in the suburbs of the city. Since 1948 - putting aside waves prior to the country's independence - Damascus has been a place of settlement for different groups of refugees, mainly from the Arab world. The proportion of refugees and displaced persons compared to the total population of the Syrian capital was very high. It was mainly composed of Palestinians (more than 350,000 individuals in the Damascus area). However, the refugees also contains several hundred Somalis, Afghans, Sudanese and Yemenis (UNHCR 2009), and the large displaced population from the occupied Syrian Golan estimated at 300,000 individuals (IDMC, 2007). Then hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees settled, escaping war, violence and economic difficulties since the 1990s and on a larger scale since 2003 (Doraï, 2009).¹In the absence of refugee camps to accommodate them,

¹ The actual number of Iraqi refugees in Syria is a sensitive issue. There is the tendency of some international organizations and the Syrian authorities to overestimate the number of Iraqis. In absence of a census, there is a debate on the actual number. Syrian authorities claim that around 1.2 to 1.5 million Iraqis are in Syria, whereas the UNHCR registered around 200,000 since 2003. According to many observers the actual number should be closer to those registered with the UNHCR. For more details on this debate see International Crisis Group, 2008; Leenders, 2008.

more than two thirds of the Iraqis registered at the UNHCR lived in the suburbs of Damascus. The proportion of refugee and displaced population was very high for a city of just over 4 million inhabitants.

The settlement of Iraqis in Damascus contributed to major change in the character of the city itself. As Barbara Drieskens and Franck Mermier (2007: 16), describe the wider processes: "urban expansion. . . [not only has] an impact on the urban morphology and on relation between centre and periphery, but also redefine [s] social frontiers within the city. These are translated into spatial practices, introducing a multiplicity of implicit and permeable frontiers [...]"

2.2. Damascus and the development of Iraqi neighbourhoods

In the southern suburb of Sayda Zaynab, the role of migrants and displaced persons is a key element in understanding urban development. According to the Syrian census of 2004, Sayda Zaynab had 136,000 inhabitants. In the 1950s, it was a small village built around the shrine of Sayda Zaynab. After 1967 war, a Palestinian refugee camp was built and accommodated 20,000 Palestinian refugees. Close to the camp a large neighborhood developed where those internally displaced from the Golan settled. A large covered market, where Syrian peasants from villages came to sell their products, separated both spaces. Later, the shrine was renovated, and thousands of Shia pilgrims originating mainly from Iran but also from Pakistan, Lebanon or Bahrain came to visit the shrine and buy goods in the *souq* that developed around the mosque. A large part of the suburb came to be dedicated to the pilgrims with hotels, guest houses, *hawzat* (shia schools) and a large bus station with connections abroad.

Since the 1970s Syria hosted opponents of opponents of Saddam Hussein's regime and Iraqi Shia also settled and developed the first Iraqi neighborhood. In 1992, after the first Gulf war, the situation changed and the majority of the Iraqis, mostly young men, who arrived in Syria had left Iraq because of the political and economic instability. Most of them worked as hired labourers or street sellers, but some developed small businesses. The poorest stayed in Syria until and after 2003, while the richest or those who connected to migratory networks managed to emigrate to Europe, North America or Australia (Dorai, 2009). Others, such as the political opponents of Saddam Hussein's regime, returned to Iraq after his fall. An Iraqi Diaspora developed for several decades and is constituted by various waves of migrants and/or of refugees (Al-Ali, 2007; Chatelard, 2005, Sassoon, 2009).

The vast majority of Iraqis in Syria are of urban origin, Baghdad being the main origin of the exodus. The majority of Iraqis settled in Damascus because it was easier to find employment and because of the proximity of the international agencies and NGOs. The Iraqi presence in Damascus concentrated in neighbourhoods such as Sayda Zaynab, Jaramana, Sahnaya, Massaken Barzeh, Yarmouk and Qodsiyyeh and in more remote localities where house rents were lower such as Sednaya or Tell, and to a lesser extent in other cities such as Aleppo, Lattaquieh or Deir el Zor.

Many families were divided and lived in several countries of exile in the Middle East and beyond. The period spent in Damascus did not constitute a simple waiting time but played an important role in the elaboration of the migratory project. Most of the interviewed refugees planned to directly migrate to Western countries when they left Iraq, but few of them had the possibility to do so. In Syria, they gathered

information on different destination countries, tried to connect with other Iraqis abroad or with smugglers, and collected money to pay for the trip. Not all the members of the same family would leave Iraq at the same time. The family reunification process often occurred in Damascus, activating the solidarity networks and facilitating settlement in the host country. Forms of solidarity developed in a transnational migratory field, which supported and accelerated the emigration process. Thomas Faist (2000) notes that the installation of earlier migrants is a central element that permits the development of migratory networks because they condense their social capital. Migration develops when social capital does not function only on a local scale but also as a *transnational transmission belt* (Faist, 2000). Previous Iraqi migration contributed to determine the subsequent concentration of migration flows towards specific locations (e.g. Sweden, Australia, United States, etc.). The latest newcomers benefit from accommodation with the rest of their family and face fewer difficulties finding employment. They live looking forward to another departure towards a third country; however the actual number of resettlements undertaken by the UNHCR remain slow.

For illustration, we will describe the situation of an Assyrian family living in Damascus. The family struggled with a very difficult economic and social situation. The husband was a photographer and shop keeper but had to stop his activity because of the Iraq war. In 2005 he fled alone to Damascus. His wife fled Iraq in 2006 with their two children. In Damascus the family shared their apartment with the husband's parents. Three of the wife's brothers were in Australia, where they claimed asylum after they left Iraq to Turkey and then Greece, and from there to Australia. Recently arrived in Australia, they were not yet

able to send money to their family in Damascus. They were trying to cope with their own resettlement and furthermore they had to pay off the significant expenses generated by their emigration journey.

The family in Damascus had to pay a 10,000 Syrian pounds (200 USD) rent each month. They managed to pay it thanks to the pension that the father-in-law of the husband - who resided in Syria - still received and which was regularly sent to them from Iraq. The part of the family that remained in Iraq also sent them basic food products, like rice, via the taxis that connected Iraq to Damascus. The geographical dispersion of the different family members as well as the precariousness of their legal and economic situations led to a dislocation of the family system of solidarity but new survival strategies and solidarity networks developed around provision of daily needs.

3. From exile to temporary settlement. Being Iraqi in Damascus

In the following part of the paper we examine some Iraqi personal cases with the aim of describing their everyday struggle in the urban Damascene environment. This will illustrate how varied the lives of the Iraqis were but still describe what it meant to be Iraqi in Damascus. Through these cases we look into subjective experiences in order to avoid seeing refugees as a universalising terminology (Malkki 1995: 497). We are enabled to understand what it means to be 'a refugee' in an urban context, trying to make a living alongside other urban poor and displaced groupings. The examples expose specific problems in the lives of Iraqi refugees due to the difficult living conditions, such as the lack of work permits, marginalisation from the rest of the society and lack of opportunities to influence their future; but the cases also illustrate

the general struggle marginalised people living in an urban context are facing.

The Iraqis who settled in Damascus came from different backgrounds and their experience varied according to their financial situation and personal network. Some came to Syria with savings while others had sold everything they owned in Iraq to be able to leave their country. Causes of Iraqi migration was also diverse, ranging from refugees fleeing persecution, to individuals or families leaving Iraq because of the general insecurity, to shopkeepers or entrepreneurs fleeing economic difficulties. This diversity gave the Iraqi community an opportunity to recompose in exile and to adapt to their host society. Nonetheless, forced exile generated a general degradation of the standard of living of Iraqi refugees as well as tensions with Syrians due to the large Iraqi presence in certain districts. The largest wave of Iraqis arrived in Syria in 2006 and 2007 and the cases we investigate both belong to this group. Many of those who arrived during that period were middle class, well-educated Iraqis, who left Iraq for a mix of reasons but mainly due to insecurity from the increased violence in the country. The following stories will show the extent to which the refugees over time got better at coping in their new environment and found ways of starting a new life in their new surroundings.

3. 1 Lack of opportunities and social prejudices reinforces temporality

The first story we want to unfold is about a young girl, called Sara.²Initially when we were introduced she explained that she felt a strong apathy because of the prolonged waiting time for a reply from the UNHCR about resettlement as well as waiting for other opportunities to move on towards a final destination. The feeling of not being able to change her situation made Sara feel apathetic, she slept a lot, did not make any friends and was very unhappy. Sara often explained that she felt that her life was put on 'pause'. The way Sara as well as many other Iraqis engaged with the host community and Damascus in general was influenced by their feeling of not wanting to settle, because they were hoping to move on quickly. They therefore made few friends and did not make any effort, almost the contrary, to become apart of the local community and engage with the society around them.

During one of many interviews Sara explained how her family had settled in Damascus and the challenges they had faced. It was very important for her to explain why they had fled Iraq and share with me the kind of life they had lived there: they had lived with her cousin's family and one day her cousin was killed by a Shia militia; because the family is Sunni they came to fear for their lives. Not long after her father started receiving threatening letters because he worked for an international company. Because of the letters and the killing of the cousin the family felt increasingly insecure and finally decided to leave.

² All names of people described in this article are changed to avoid putting them at danger.

Sara arrived in Syria in 2006 where she lived with her mother, father and brother. She was 26 years old when we first met about a year and a half after she had arrived to Damascus. Due to Syrian laws she was not allowed to work or to finish her university degree; in Iraq she had been studying for a bachelor in English Literature at Baghdad University. Sara loved languages and was therefore trying to learn French. She explained that her plan to learn French was really "just to do something", but generally when we first met she was spending most of her time at home. In Iraq she used to go out a lot and had many friends, but in Syria she did not feel like it, she could not afford it and did not have any friends to meet. Because Sara did not plan to stay in Syria and because she officially was not allowed to study or work and therefore could not do the things she used to do she felt depressed and upset. She often explained that she was struggling to find hope for the future.

During this period Sara lived with her family in a Sunni dominated suburb to Damascus, Sahnaya. They lived in the small basement flat because it was the cheapest. They were trying to make the money last as long as possible as they felt insecure about their future. Sahnaya had recently been inhabited by many Iraqi refugees. Most of them lived a while in Sayda Zaynab but since Sayda Zaynab was mainly inhabited by Shia Muslims and pilgrims, other religious groupings tended to move out when they found other affordable places to stay.

Sahnaya used to be inhabited by Christian Syrians. It was built around a main street with a small shopping area, a couple of restaurants, medical clinics and some churches. The surroundings of the centre around the main street changed fast and new buildings rose everywhere. Most of the new blocks were half empty and half inhabited - being built and

inhabited simultaneously - the system was to complete a full floor and as soon as it was finished one family could move in. From the rent and other income the owner of the building finished the flats one by one so that as soon a flat was finished a new family could move in and start paying for the next. The area is not particularly attractive since it is located on the outskirts of Damascus on the road to Jordan. The area had a problem with water supply and the poor quality of the buildings and inadequate heating and high costs of petroleum made the living costs high especially during winter.

All members of Sara's family were registered with the UNHCR and hoped and waited for resettlement and by the time I met them they had already waited for years.³ The time spent waiting was hard for everyone in the family. The health of Sara's mother worsened, her father was increasingly frustrated and her bother got more and more introverted, sitting in front of his computer constantly chatting with friends back in Iraq. As I got to know Sara better she told me a lot much about how she felt about her life in Damascus. She explained how hard she felt it was for her to be accepted and how hard it was for her to forget for a moment that she was Iraqi and an outsider. She explained how Syrians could always tell by her accent that she was from Iraq, and that this determined her relationship with her surroundings. Sara explained that she felt that Syrians did not like Iraqis because they believed that the Iraqi presence led to increased prices on housing, food and other commodities. The feeling of not being welcome also influenced her self-esteem and engagement with her surroundings. Sara's story points out that

³As far as I know they are still waiting now in 2011.

the apathy caused by lack of opportunities and how a feeling of temporality affected the way Iraqis like Sara were (not) engaging with the society and explains the way of life in the urban areas of Damascus where Iraqis settled.

3.2. The "Little Baghdad's" of Damascus

Despite the limited engagement of some Iraqis, in other areas and suburbs Iraqis developed different ways of engaging and making a living by various kinds of economic activities, ranging from street sellers, to small clothing manufactures or small grocery shops. These modes of settlement were both connected to the personal itineraries of Iraqi entrepreneurs and the specific urban context in some Damascus' neighborhoods. These areas facilitated the development of a wide range of coping strategies for these Iraqi businessmen. In the following we will describe two unique Iraqi areas of Damascus.

In Sayda Zaynab, west of Hajjira roundabout extends the area where a large number of Iraqis resided. The main street was called "Iraqi street" and many Iraqi-owned businesses developed there. Several travel agencies opened -also very present in Jaramana- selling taxi or bus tickets to the main Iraqi cities. Iraqi taxi drivers offered their services to these agencies and carried passengers, bags and cartons of goods to Iraq. However, the areas were constantly changing according to circumstances, for example when after October 2007 Iraqis needed a visa prior to entry into Syria there was a sharp decrease in traffic.

Numerous small shops were located both in Jaramana and Sayda Zaynab: popular restaurants offering traditional Iraqi dishes, Iraqi bakeries, and small grocery stores that imported Iraqi food previously not

available in Syria. Street vendors offered Iraqi pastries for take-away, carp for the preparation of the *Masgouf* (grilled carp), or Iraqi tea. Bigger shops were also developed, for example the pastry shop Al Baghdadi in Sayda Zaynab that produced many types of Iraqi pastry, which were sold in other Iraqi neighborhoods in Damascus. In the narrower streets of the two neighborhoods many small shops developed that offered traditional Iraqi clothing like scarfs and hats, as well as flags marked with the colors of Iraq and the jerseys of the Iraqi football team, which won the Asian Cup of Nations in 2007.

Some parts of the Damascene suburbs have deeply changed since the arrival of Iraqi refugees. Iraqi businesses and restaurants as well as travel agencies developed rapidly and locally modified the townscape. Iraqis developed their own activities in the different suburbs of Damascus, ranging from street sellers, to small clothing manufactures or small grocer's shop. These economic activities were both connected to entrepreneurs' and workers' personal itineraries and the rather flexible urban context in which they were situated, which facilitated the adaptation of the newcomers.

3.3 Influencing the atmosphere

Jaramana, known to be the main Druze quarter in Damascus, used to be a quiet suburb with green fields and animal grazing on the outskirts. Later, concrete blocks rose everywhere, many inhabited by newly arrived Iraqis. Also many Christians had settled since the 1970s in the area as well as other groupings because of lower rents and liberal atmosphere. In the streets of Jaramana women's dress was less conservative and there were night clubs and prostitutes in the streets.

The next case focuses on an entirely different type of refugee than Sara and her family, that of a young man who is not waiting to be resettled via UNHCR but is one amongst a large group of mostly young men, who save money in order to be able to pay for the illegal trip to Europe. The men struggled for the dream to create a better future for themselves and their families and they felt a high pressure to make it to Europe and send back remittances at some point in time. This group of young men had minimal contact with the official refugee apparatus, they were not registered with UNHCR, and they made a living from varying degrees of semi-legal enterprises.

This specific group lived in shared apartments with other young men in order to save money. During interviews the men would explain that they had chosen to live in Jaramana because of the more liberal atmosphere where they attracted less attention from the authorities and the community did not bother too much about their activities. They lived on their own without their families, and behaved as they wanted. The men argued that Jaramana was a good place to live because it was easy to find cheap food and there were many places of entertainment. One of the men, Mohammed, 28 years old and from Baghdad, lived with three friends who knew each other from Iraq. They had always made plans to leave Syria, but during the time we conducted interviews with them, they were not successful in carrying out their plans.

Mohammed, made a living together with his friends on a very day to day basis and spent most days sleeping or waiting in the streets for something to happen. They often went to the streets to look at girls or chat to friends. Mohammed liked Jaramana because the atmosphere was more liberal and the streets were always busy. He explained that he felt less

noticed and that he would have found it difficult to live in this way in a more conservative setting like Sayda Zaynab.

The neighbouring Syrian families described the Iraqi presence in Jaramana in a different way. They explained that the Iraqis had influenced the area in a bad way, and mentioned that young Iraqi men had caused increased demand for prostitution and increased consumption of alcohol. The freedom that the young men enjoyed increased Syrians' dissatisfaction with the massive Iraqi presence in some areas. Combined with the experience of price inflation and a Syrian infrastructure struggling to keep up with urban expansion, the Iraqi presence caused with the Syrian host populations and, as a result, some Syrians moved from the area.

3.4 An evolving permanence

The Iraqi settlement in Damascus appeared to become permanent as time passed. How this permanence evolved varied from area to area as did engagement with the host community. In some areas the tension between the populations increased but in others the situation stabilised. Damascus was adapting to the refugees while the image of the city was changing. Due to the increased permanence of the temporary settlement new challenges were being faced both on a personal level and in the different areas. At a personal level the Iraqis who had not yet been offered asylum in a third country started to look at other ways to achieve the future they were hoping for, for example by marriages and family reunions, illegal migration or simply by settling more permanently in Syria.

To return to Sara's personal situation, it was hard for her to hold on to her hope of receiving a resettlement permit. In the last interview

in early 2010 she emphasised that she was starting to doubt whether resettlement would be good for her in the end. She explained that it had been hard to start a life in Syria, owing to the stress of not being accepted and from not being able to live the life that she wanted. In Iraq she had been a young attractive woman, just about to finish her bachelor degree and about to start her career and perhaps find a husband. Now she felt that due to the restrictions on her life the 'pause' was becoming permanent. She underlined in our conversations that it would be difficult to start all over again in a third country, and therefore she was not sure about wanting to be resettled, if she had the chance. Her view of Syria had changed and she had started to try to establish herself more. The last time we met she explained that almost a year earlier she had started to work and was looking for a husband. She explained that she had started to understand that her life in Syria might not come to an end soon, and she might as well get the best from the situation that she could.

4. Conclusions and challenges in the future

The Iraqi refugees in Damascus demonstrate the importance of forced migration in an unstable Middle East for the development of the region's cities. The Iraqis' presence in Damascus had, as described, led to changes of the city, more visible in some areas than others. Many of the refugees we studied prior to the uprising expressed their beliefs that they were getting increasingly established and used to living in Syria as time passed and that they were giving up the hope for resettlement. As a result, the question of their legal situation would have to be addressed to enable them to access the job market and to give them clear residency

rights. In September 2011 more than 122,000 Iraqis were registered in Syria, with more than 1,200 new registrations since January 2011 (UNHCR 2011).

Due to the recent and massive arrival of the Iraqis, belonging to different social classes and religious or ethnic groups, it was very difficult to assess how long their exile would last. Refugees with temporary statuses can stay for very long periods in their host states, as is the case for some Iraqis in Jordan, or for the Sudanese in Lebanon. Yet, well established refugees, like Palestinians in Kuwait or to a lesser extent in Libya, can be expelled *en masse* during regional political crises. Migrants in the Middle East are often subject to rapid changes in their situation, and strong local integration (through economic participation for example) does not always mean integration in the long term. In fact, economic participation can lead to empowerment of the refugees who are thus able to emigrate. Emigration or resettlement strongly depends on access to resources. Most of the Iraqi migrants belong to groups with high connections with the Diaspora and the host society.

Comparing the settlement of Iraqis at the regional level, the situation in Damascus is unique. While the presence of migrants and refugees is visible in the public space in some neighbourhoods in Beirut, Iraqi migration remains more or less invisible there. In Amman, where hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have settled or transited since 1991, only a few public spaces can be labelled as Iraqi. In Damascus, the mass arrival of Iraqis has deeply transformed the periphery of the Syrian capital. The flexible migration policy as well as the tolerance towards informal economic activity have contributed to this phenomenon. The

nature of the migration movement combining asylum, economic migration and pilgrimage is also important. Finally, the current urban dynamic, where internal and international migrations play a leading role, is also a key element to understand the mode of settlement of Iraqis. They are only the last wave of arrivals in spaces strongly structured by migrations and mobility.

The Syrian uprising may reverse the trend toward permanent Iraqi resettlement in Syria. Opportunities declined and the security situation became more difficult. The development of security checkpoints was limiting the possibilities for Iraqis to move in the city. On the other hand, UNHCR resettlement procedures in Syria has slowed and refugees who could not go back to Iraq (for security, personal or economic reasons) were trapped in Syria. If the number of Iraqis registered with the UNHCR decreased after the Uprising, this was not a new phenomenon and did not

The Syrian uprising may reverse the trend toward permanent Iraqi resettlement in Syria. Opportunities declined and the security situation became more difficult. The development of security checkpoints was limiting the possibilities for Iraqis to move in the city. On the other hand, UNHCR resettlement procedures in Syria stopped and refugees who could not go back to Iraq (for security, personal or economic reasons) were trapped in Syria. If the number of Iraqis registered with the UNHCR decreasing after the Uprising, this trend is not a new phenomenon and did not, according to UNHCR statistics, initially seem to accelerate. Iraqi refugees seemed caught between the accelerating violence in both their host country and their home state.