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Palestinian and Iraqi Refugees and Urban Change in Lebanon and Syria

Mohamed Kamel Dorai

Migration is a key issue in most of the Middle Eastern countries affected both by a high rate of emigration and increasing immigration. Due to political instability, the region has one of the largest refugee and internally displaced populations in the world, mainly consisting of Palestinians and Iraqis. Most of these migrant populations reside in urban areas such as Cairo, Amman, Beirut, and Damascus. At the same time, the whole region is experiencing rapid urban development. The urban population increased from one quarter of the total population in the 1950s to over 60% in 2005. The migrants — domestic and international, forced or not — are one of the main drivers of urban development in the region.¹

Despite the diversity of existing situations, refugee movements are generally long-lasting, and the ends of conflicts do not always mean a return for the entire refugee population. The settlement of these populations generates profound changes in entire neighborhoods. Thus, 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. An important part of the southern suburbs of Beirut was inhabited by Palestinian refugees following the 1948 war and, later, by internally displaced Lebanese originating from south Lebanon, along with other migrants, including Syrians.² Cities like Amman have experienced substantial changes with the arrival of 300,000 Palestinians expelled from Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion in 1990.³ More recently, some neighborhoods in Damascus have been transformed profoundly by the settlement of thousands of Iraqis escaping war, violence, and economic difficulties since the 1990s and by a larger scale flight since 2003.⁴

Iraqi refugees and the urbanization process in Damascus

Urban development in Damascus depends largely on the arrival of new migrant populations, both Syrian and from abroad, who settle in the city's suburbs. Since 1948 (not to mention previous waves prior to the country's independence), Damascus has been a place of settlement for different groups of refugees,

¹ See : Al-Ali, Nadjie (2004) *The Relationship between Migration within and from the Middle East and North-Africa and Pro-Poor Policies*. Discussion Paper. Department for International Development, Institute of Arab & Islamic Studies - University of Exeter [<https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/4888/2/migrationMENAreport-1>] ; Fargues, Philippe (2009) "Introduction", *CARIM Mediterranean Migration Report 2008-2009*, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, San Domenico di Fiesole (FI): European University Institute, p. 19-38 ; Tabutin, Dominique & Schoumaker, Bruno (2005) "The Demography of the Arab World and the Middle East from the 1950s to the 2000s. A Survey of Changes and a Statistical Assessment", *Population*, 5-6, 60ème année, p. 505-615.

² Clerc, Valérie (2006) "Beyrouth : l'influence du foncier et des plans d'urbanisme sur la formation des quartiers irréguliers de la banlieue sud", *Mappemonde*, n°84, 4-2006, 15 p.

³ Van Hear, Nicholas (2005) "The Impact of the Involuntary Mass 'Return' to Jordan in the Wake of the Gulf Crisis", *International Migration Review*, Vol. 29, n°2, pp. 352-374.

⁴ Dorai, Mohamed Kamel (2009) "L'exil irakien à Damas. Modes d'insertion urbaine et reconfiguration des réseaux migratoires", *EchoGéo*, 2009, n°8, [<http://echogeo.revues.org/index10976.html>].

mainly from the Arab world. The proportion of refugees and displaced persons compared to the total population of the Syrian capital is very high. Mainly composed of Palestinians (more than 350,000 in the Damascus area), the refugee group also includes several hundred Somalis, Afghans, Sudanese, and Yemenis, as well as the large displaced population from the occupied Syrian Golan Heights (estimated at 300,000). Since 2003, thousands of Iraqi refugees have settled there.⁵ In the absence of refugee camps to accommodate them, more than two-thirds of the Iraqis registered by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) live in Damascus. The proportion of refugees and displaced people is very high for a city of just over four million inhabitants. Since the 1970s, Syria had hosted opponents of the previous Iraqi regime. Following the First Gulf War (1991), the situation changed. The majority of Iraqis who arrived in Syria left Iraq because of the political situation and economic difficulties. Most of these Iraqis were young men who settled in large numbers in Sayda Zaynab, a southern suburb of Damascus. Most of them worked as day workers or street vendors, but some of them developed small businesses. The poorest stayed in Syria until 2003, while the richest or those who have structured migratory networks managed to emigrate to Europe, North America, or Australia. The vast majority of Iraqis in Syria are of urban origin, primarily from Baghdad. They, like previous waves of migrants, settled in Damascus. There they found it easier to find employment and to gain access to international agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The Iraqi presence in Damascus is concentrated in some of the neighborhoods of suburbs such as Sayda Zaynab, Jaramana, Massaken Barzeh, Yarmouk, and Qodsiyyeh; in more remote localities where the rents are relatively low such as Sednaya and Tell; and, to a lesser extent, in other cities such as Aleppo, Lattaquieh, and Deir el Zor.

The urban landscape has changed dramatically since the Iraqis' arrival. Iraqi businesses and restaurants as well as travel agencies specializing in Iraq have developed rapidly and have modified the local townscape. The Iraqis have developed their own economic activities in the different suburbs of Damascus, ranging from street vendors to small clothing manufacturers and small groceries. These activities are both connected to the personal itineraries of the entrepreneurs and workers and the rather flexible urban context in which they are situated, which has facilitated the adaptation of the newcomers.

From camp to city: the urbanization process of Palestinian refugee camps

In the Palestinian case, due to the Middle East's rapid urbanization, most of the refugee camps are part of the capitals and main cities in their respective countries or host regions. Sixty years of exile have generated new forms of local integration, especially in urban areas where refugee camps are now part of the cities that surround them. Since the late 1940s, refugee camps transformed markedly, from tents to very densely built up areas. Since the 1950s, the places where Palestinians settled in the Beirut suburbs were not only

⁵ In absence of census, there is a debate on the actual number of Iraqis in Syria; Syrian authorities claiming 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 close to those registered with the UNHCR.

Palestinian areas, but poor and segregated neighborhoods where marginalized migrants, such as Syrians, Kurds, and Armenians, also settled.⁶ Parallel to the urbanization process, the refugee camp population has profoundly changed due to emigration, internal displacement, and social mobility. Refugee camps can become parts of urban areas or may become themselves urban centers due to their demographic weight and the variety of activities developed there (e.g., socioeconomic activities, political decisionmaking) and the central role they play in the Palestinian society in exile. In some specific cases, the categorization depends upon the institution in charge of the refugees. For example, in Damascus, Yarmouk is considered a refugee camp by the Syrian authorities whereas the UN Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) does not recognize it as such. At an operational level (i.e., international responsibility, access to services, the legal context, etc.), a clear distinction exists between camp dwellers and urban refugees. But the analysis of the geographical development of refugee camps in their local context leads us to consider the refugee camps as urban areas. Camps tend to look increasingly like that of the poorer informal urban areas nearby. The temporal dimension of the Palestinian exile is also a key element to take into consideration. Sixty years of exile have led to a specific relationship with their host societies, with a strong local integration linked to a rapid urbanization of the different host countries parallel to a strong segregation due to the socio-political and legal context. Refugee camps themselves host, temporarily or more permanently, different waves and groups of refugees. New immigrant communities also settle in and/or around the camps. In Damascus for example, Iraqis refugees settle in neighborhoods composed of Palestinian refugees, internally displaced Syrians from the Golan, and internal migrants coming from the countryside. The same pattern can be found in many other cities in the region, such as Beirut, 'Amman, and Cairo. Urban margins, where refugees and migrants settle, are not disconnected from the urban dynamics of the surrounding cities. Refugee camps develop ties with their urban environment. Even if they are segregated and marginalized, they nonetheless are part of the urban settings that host them.

Conclusion

In an unstable Middle Eastern political context, Iraqi and Palestinian cases demonstrate the importance of forced migration in urban development and their articulation with other forms of migration, such as internal migration and international labor migration. Most of the current refugee populations settle in urban areas to access resources and develop in certain localities their own social and economic activities contributing to the urban change. In the specific Palestinian case, a diachronic analysis of the different camps' evolution enables us to retrace their specific history and the different ties with their local urban environment. On the one hand, camps appear to be marginalized and segregated areas due to the special — and often changing — regulation and modes of control as well as the legal status of their Palestinian residents. On the other hand, refugee camps are strongly connected to their urban environment through the daily mobility of Palestinian refugees, the growing presence of other groups of refugees and migrants

⁶ Sfeir, Jihane (2008) *L'exil palestinien au Liban. Le temps des origines (1947-1952)*, Paris : Editions Karthala & Beirut : ifpo, p. 208.

(such as foreign workers, asylum seekers, and refugees), and the development of commercial activities that blur the boundaries of the refugee camps, making it a part of the city.