

Dispossession and Displacement: Forced Migration in the Middle East and North Africa

In February 2008, a group of British Academy-sponsored organisations held a conference to consider one of the world's pressing problems. The conference co-ordinator, Dr Dawn Chatty, describes the background to the event and its conclusions.

Dispossession and forced migration have been an indelible part of life in the modern history of the Middle East and North Africa – as witnessed by the waves of Circassian Muslim and Jewish groups dispossessed and forced into the region at the end of the nineteenth century, followed by the displacement, death marches and massacres of Armenians and other Christian groups at the end of World War I. Between the two World Wars, the Kurds emerged as the next victims of dispossession. They were followed by the Palestinians – Christian and Muslim –

who fled their homes in the struggle for control over the formerly British-mandated Palestine shortly after the end of World War II.

In just the past twenty years, however, the scale of previous forced migrations has been dwarfed by the nearly four million Iraqis who have fled their country or been internally displaced since 1990. Two million of these fled into Syria and Jordan between 2006 and 2007. In the summer of 2006, one million Lebanese took refuge in Syria. And during this same period, Sudanese and Somali refugees have continued to flood into Egypt and Yemen seeking peace, security and sustainable livelihoods. These events have sometimes attracted penetrating media coverage, but also serious research interest: there are increasing numbers of applications for research and travel grants to study the

growing phenomena of forced migration in the region. As a result, the Council for British Research in the Levant took the lead in suggesting that it was time to look more carefully at the subject as a whole and, whenever possible, encourage a comparative perspective.

A preliminary meeting on the subject was held at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, in January 2007. Involved in this exploratory meeting were representatives from the Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL), the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA), the British Institute at Ankara (BIAA), the British Institute of Persian Studies

Hundreds of Iraqi refugees await their turn at a centre in Damascus to receive food aid offered to Iraqi refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Program, on 3 December 2007. (Louai Beshara/AFP/Getty Images)



(BIPS), the British Institute for the Study of Iraq (BISI), and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES), as well as staff and students of the universities of Durham, Exeter, Oxford, Sussex, London School of Economics, University College London, and Utrecht. The general sense emerging from this meeting was that it would be extremely useful to hold a conference on dispossession and displacement in the Middle East, and to try to identify areas of research that needed to be explored further. Although there were some sensitivities about the term 'Middle East', it was decided to accept the broadest definition of the area as extending from Mauretania and Morocco in the west to Afghanistan in the east. The lives of refugees and other forced migrants were recognised as a growing, highly pertinent area of contemporary research. Although most cases of people falling into the category of refugees and forced migrants arose from generally well-known complex humanitarian emergencies or natural disasters, the topic encompassed many others, including those who have been resettled through development programmes and government policies to reduce nomadic mobility, through biodiversity conservation programmes, and generalised poverty. What this preliminary workshop noted was that the researchers involved in this increasingly specialised area appeared to be tightly focused on their individual study areas, and that opportunities for collaboration and comparative initiatives and dissemination efforts were lacking.

As a result of this recognition, the CBRL, BIEA, BIAA, BIPS, BISI and BRISMES agreed to work together as institutional partners to develop a common agenda for the coming years. As a first step in this direction, a British Academy-sponsored conference was held on 28–29 February 2008 in London, which brought together a wide range of scholars as well as development/aid professionals working on the theme of forced migration in the region. The conference explored the extent to which forced migration has come to be a defining feature of life in the Middle East and North Africa. It presented research on refugees, internally displaced peoples (IDPs), as well as those who remain, from Afghanistan in the east to Morocco in the west, as well as Sudan to the south. The

papers were grouped around four related themes: (1) displacement, (2) repatriation, (3) identity in exile, and (4) refugee policy, to give a sense of sequence and coherence to the conference. The proceedings were also grounded academically and substantively by two keynote papers which explored theory and policy with regard to refugees and other forced migrants, as well as the specific nature of Iraqi displacement: these were presented by Professor Barbara Harrell-Bond (the doyenne of forced migration studies) and Dr Effie Voutira, and by Dr Géraldine Chatelard.

The first theme, *displacement*, included papers on: the future of the Turkish immigrant settlers in northern Cyprus once an agreement was reached between north and south Cyprus; the continuing internal displacement and the loss of livelihoods among Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem; and the Afghan Hazara migratory networks between Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and the Western countries. The second theme, *repatriation*, included the topics of: reintegration of second generation Afghans – Afghan refugee youth as a 'burnt out generation' in post-conflict return; failed repatriation among Kibarti refugees in Uganda; and the transformation of identity and exile among Sudanese refugees. The third theme, *identity in exile*, had presentations on: Sahrawi identity in refugee camps as well as in Europe; expression of the 'self' in poetry among Afghan refugees in Iran; and oral history among Iraqi refugees in Jordan. The fourth theme centred on *policy and practice in forced migration* and looked at: the human rights of forced migrants in Morocco; the role which identity documentation has on the persistent dislocation and displacement of Palestinian refugees; and regional policy regarding Iraqi refugees in the Middle East as a whole.

Not surprisingly a particular interest in gender and generation ran throughout the conference – with significant scrutiny of the impact that the upheaval of forced migration has had on relations between men and women, and between generations. Whether regarded as 'burnt-out' by elders or generally traumatised and alienated, many refugee youths, particularly in urban contexts, have found their identity shaped by social

narratives not of their own making. Their sense of discrimination and lack of opportunity thus emerged as an important theme at the conference. The plight of Iraqi refugees in the region and the very limited humanitarian assistance they were receiving was also closely considered. So few Iraqis, we were told, were applying for third country resettlement. Most, it seemed, preferred to wait in a bordering country – even with little or no international aid – so as to take the first safe opportunity to return to their homeland and homes. Yet, these Iraqis were increasingly running out of funds to keep their families together, while at the same time little was being done internationally or at the state level to extend humanitarian aid or legal protection to this largely self-settled refugee group. The need for protection and human security continues to increase as these dispossessed Iraqis struggle to protect their families and keep their society from fragmenting any further.

The conference concluded by exploring new research themes which the partners would take forward in the coming year. Not surprisingly, Iraqi refugees and IDPs were highest on the agenda, with a general agreement to secure funding to carry out grounded research with this group, exploring the ways in which Iraqi refugees in the region developed alternative strategies for protection and human security and international legal protection. Accompanying this research drive would be a related effort to create a series of 'poetry-contests' by Iraqi and other refugees, to encourage, stimulate and promote self-expression, identity and cultural pride.

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The Council for British Research in the Levant, the British Institute in Eastern Africa, the British Institute at Ankara, the British Institute of Persian Studies, the British Institute for the Study of Iraq, and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies are organisations sponsored by the British Academy. More information can be found at www.britac.ac.uk/institutes/index.html
