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# **Iraqi Refugees in Syria**

**By  
Mohamed Kamel Dorai<sup>1</sup>**

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# Discussion Paper

## Iraqi Refugees in Syria

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### I. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Syria has hosted different refugee groups in large numbers such as Armenians, Palestinians and more recently Lebanese escaping the last war during the summer 2006. Since 2003, Syria hosts a large Iraqi community. It is important to note that despite the reception of different waves of refugees, Syria, like most countries in the region, is neither part of the 1951 Convention nor the 1967 Protocol, and there is no specific memorandum of understanding between UNHCR and the Syrian authorities. Syria is, along with Jordan, one of the main host countries for Iraqis fleeing their country, especially since 2003, as shown on the following table.

**Table 1: Estimated Number of Displaced Iraqis in the Middle East (April 2007)**

<b>Country / Region</b>	<b>Individuals</b>
Syria	1 200 000
Jordan	750 000
Egypt	100 000
Iran	54 000
Lebanon	40 000
Turkey	10 000
Gulf States	200 000
<i>Total</i>	<i>2 354 000</i>

Note : Estimates include recognized refugees, asylum seekers and other Iraqis who may be in need of international protection.

Source : *Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World*, UNHCR, April 2007, ([www.unhcr.org/iraq.html](http://www.unhcr.org/iraq.html)).

According to UNHCR statistics, Iraqis form the vast majority of refugees in Syria compared to the few hundreds of Somalis, Afghans, Sudanese and Yemenites.

**Table 2: UNHCR Registered Refugees and Asylum-Seekers Hosted in Syria (August 2007)**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Refugees</b>	<b>Asylum seekers</b>
Iraq <sup>1</sup>	110 566	-
Somalia	1 719	3 003
Afghanistan	247	407
Sudan	224	858
Iran	163	458
Others	192	951
<i>Total</i>	<i>113 111</i>	<i>5 677</i>

Source: *UNHCR at a Glance*, August 2007 – UNHCR Syria.

<sup>1</sup> Since January 2007 Iraqis coming from southern and central districts are considered as *prima facie* refugees.

The present exodus of Iraqi refugees has its own specificities. There was no mass exodus in one or two waves, such as in the Palestinian case in 1948; there was, rather, a growing influx of individuals and families crossing everyday the boundary between Iraq and Syria, especially since the Samarra bombing in February 2006. Since 2003, Syria has an open-door migratory policy towards Iraqis, considered as Arab citizens, and does not expel them (there have been recent measures to restrict the entry of Iraqi refugees, however, which have been announced by Syrian authorities). Refugees have access to education and the health system, with some restrictions due to the large number of new arrivals. All the refugees are located in urban areas, no refugee camps exist except for an estimated 1,400 Palestinians refugees from Iraq, who are settled in three refugee camps: one in Syria (Al Hol in Hassakeh governorate), one in Iraq (Al Waleed) and one in the no-man's-land between the two countries. (Al Tanf)<sup>2</sup>

One of the major problems for the study of Iraqis in Syria is the lack of resources available on the subject. Apart from the various documents published by the UNHCR since 2003, only a few comprehensive studies have been recently published.<sup>3</sup> Only a few statistics are available, mainly those of the UNHCR, but they cover less than 20% of the total Iraqi population, and the few elements that are published by the Syrian Bureau of Statistics. This study mostly relies on the different statistics and studies developed by the UNCHR and the press articles

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<sup>2</sup> Brazil and Chile have agreed to resettle some of these Palestinian refugees [<http://www.un.org/News/>]. Due to the specificity of the Palestinian question, I will not develop the question of non-Iraqi refugees from Iraq.

<sup>3</sup> The two main studies are:

- "Assessment of the Situation of Iraqi Refugees in Syria", UNHCR – UNICEF – WFP, Damascus, March 2006, 68 p.

- Al-Khalidi, Ashraf; Hoffmann, Sophia and Tanner, Victor (2007) *Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic: A field-Based Snapshot*, The Brooking Institution – Univesity of Bern, Project on Internal Displacement, 48 p. [[www.brookings.edu/idp](http://www.brookings.edu/idp)]

related to the fieldwork done since February 2007.<sup>4</sup> This paper is based on ongoing research and aims to present some first results.

## II. The Mass Arrival of Iraqis in Syria since 2003<sup>5</sup>

A 2003 UNHCR report briefly illustrates the situation of Iraqis before 2003:

The Iraqi refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic are mostly of Arab ethnicity, 70% are Shias originating from the southern part of Iraq, around 15% are Sunnis and the remainder are Kurds, Assyrians from Baghdad and Basrah, Turkomen from the Khanaquin region and Yazidis from the Sinjar area. Some 2,400 Iraqis have been granted or are being considered for refugee status by UNHCR. Furthermore, there are around 60,000-70,000 Iraqis who have never approached UNHCR or have been denied refugee status through the UNHCR refugee status determination process and continue to reside illegally in the country, tolerated by the Syrian authorities. Most Iraqis in Syria are concentrated in the Saida Zeineb quarter in Damascus located near prominent Shia shrines.<sup>6</sup>

Since 2003, the situation has dramatically changed and Iraqis are now located in most of the Damascus suburbs and neighbouring cities.

### *The Growing Iraqi Presence in Syria Since 2003*

Syria has been, until this last week, the only Iraqi neighbouring state to maintain an open border which permits Iraqi nationals to enter. Some attempts to restrict the entry of Iraqis in Syria, however, have been announced periodically. During the first semester of 2007, the duration of the visa granted to the Iraqi citizens at the border have been reduced to one month renewable (it was previously three months renewable). Since September 11, 2007, Iraqis wishing to enter Syria have to apply for a visa; this was finally been implemented on October, 1<sup>st</sup>. Only Iraqis entering the country for commercial, transport, scientific and education purposes have obtained visas since the implementation of the visa procedure.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank particularly UNHCR Regional Public Information Officer Sybella Wilkes and *Caritas Migrants* team in Damascus for their precious help.

<sup>5</sup> I will not discuss here the reasons why Iraqis decide to leave their country, a good summary of these reasons can be found in the report made by Al-Khalidi et. al., *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> "Preliminary Repatriation and Reintegration Plan for Iraq", UNHCR, April 2003, p. 6 ([www.unhcr.org/iraq.html](http://www.unhcr.org/iraq.html)). One can add the old presence of Chaldean church (Saint Teresa) in Old Damascus, which is now hosting the large Chaldean community coming from Iraq.

<sup>7</sup> - "Iraqis prevented from entering Syria by new visa rules, UN refugee agency says" *UN News services*, 11 Sept. 2007 [<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=23764&Cr=iraq&Cr1=syria#>]

Asked on the reason why Iraqis have "chosen" Syria as the host country, most of the interviewees' answers are the following: 1. Syria is the only country that accept Iraqis; 2. they already have some family or close relations in Syria; 3. life in Syria is affordable (compared for example with the northern districts of Iraq); and 4. they have access to school and partial access to the health system.

Some Iraqis are crossing Syria to go to Lebanon, but the number of Iraqis remains low in Lebanon due to strict entry visa regulation, and detention of illegal migrants. As mentioned by a report of Frontiers association in Beirut:

As Lebanon does not share borders with Iraq, there was no massive rush of Iraqis on the Lebanese borders. Most Iraqis pass through Syria before arriving to Lebanon [...]. At the end of 2005, the Lebanese General Security granted visas for Iraqis at all border points if Iraqis could provide the following: a return non-refundable ticket, a hotel reservation or the address and phone number of a person in Lebanon and 2000 US\$ in cash or in a bank account. Hence, Iraqis who fulfilled these conditions were admitted to Lebanon on temporary basis. Many Iraqis were unable to meet these conditions mostly because of financial reasons. As a result, most Iraqis are forced to enter Lebanon illegally in unsafe smuggling conditions and remain in illegality for the period of their stay. [...] Even those who were granted entry visa face difficulties when they wish to prolong their stay in Lebanon.<sup>8</sup>

The costs of everyday life, the difficulty to obtain a residency right as well as the political instability are the main elements that can explain the relatively low Iraqi emigration towards Lebanon from Syria.

#### *A Difficult Estimate of the Iraqi Presence*

As mentioned by Karen Jacobsen "[t]he hidden, marginalized nature of urban refugees makes it difficult to make accurate estimates, and each 'authoritative' source has its own agenda and set of reasons for the number it puts out."<sup>9</sup> It is relatively difficult to evaluate the foreign population living in Syria. The Syrian census of population of 2004 indicates, for example, an Arab foreign population (Palestinians are not included) of 88,566 people and 9,638

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- "Syria: UNHCR advocating for increased bilateral aid and 'humanitarian visas' for Iraqi refugees", *summary of what was said by UNHCR spokesperson Ron Redmond at the press briefing, on 5 October 2007, at the Palais des Nations in Geneva* [<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/iraq?page=briefing&id=470607922>]

<sup>8</sup> Frontiers Association, *Annual Report. Refugee and Migrant Protection in Lebanon in 2006*, Beirut [[www.frontiersassociation.org](http://www.frontiersassociation.org)]: 19.

<sup>9</sup> Jacobsen, Karen (2006) "Editorial Introduction. Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Urban Areas: A livelihoods Perspective", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 19, n°3: 275.

Asians. The Arab nationals can reside without asking for a residency permit. They obtain a three months visa when entering Syria. When their visa expires, they have the possibility to prolong it for another three months. Then, they have to leave the country and cross the border again to obtain a new residency right of 3 months.

Syrian authorities as well as the UNHCR and other international organisations estimate the number of Iraqis in Syria at 1.2 to 1.4 million. As the vast majority do not hold a residency card but have tourist visas (they are considered as "guests"), the actual number of Iraqis residing in Syria is hard to assess. By December 2005, a survey done by the UNHCR, WFP and the UNICEF estimated the number of Iraqis at 450,000.<sup>10</sup> If we consider the number of entry between 30,000 and 40,000 per month since January 2006, the total population of Iraqis would be between 1 and 1.2 million in Syria in October 2007.

The number of Iraqis entering Syria is rapidly increasing since 1999, passing from 58,136 to 253,120 in 2003, this number being multiplied by three in 2004 and exceeding 900,000 in 2005, as shown in the table below. An average of 30,000 to 40,000 Iraqis enter Syrian territory each month according to *Al Baath* newspaper,<sup>11</sup> an estimate corroborated by the following table.

**Table 3: Annual Arrivals of Iraqi and Arabs in Syria, Years 1999-2005**

Nationality	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	1999-2005
Iraq	58 136	85 439	187 954	278 934	253 120	804 131	913 266	+ 1 570%
Total Arabs	1 993 766	2 262 418	2 496 502	3 164 945	3 398 978	4 850 437	4 462 254	+ 223%

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, Syria - [www.carim.org](http://www.carim.org), 2007.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Iraq, the Syrian authorities recognize that irregular migrations are very difficult to control, even if the number of people apprehended for illegal residence remains very low, around 300 individuals per year.<sup>12</sup> (In September 2007, Syrian authorities have confirmed that they will not deport Iraqi refugees.<sup>13</sup>)

<sup>10</sup> "Assessment of the Situation of Iraqi Refugees in Syria", UNHCR – UNICEF – WFP, Damascus, March 2006, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> "The Iraqi Refugees in Syria. Between the Dream of Stability and the Last Decisions", *Al Baath*, 22 February 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Simon, Julien (2006) "Irregular Transit Migration in the Mediterranean: Facts, Figures and Insights", in Ninna Nyberg Sørensen, ed. *Mediterranean Transit Migration*, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen: 34.

<sup>13</sup> "Syria assures UN it will not forcibly deport Iraqi refugees under new visa system", 4 September 2007 [<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=23683&Cr=Iraq&Cr1=#>]

The number of Iraqis registered by the UNHCR is rapidly changing, but the following table gives an idea on the socio-religious composition of the Iraqi community in Syria. A new registration centre opened in Duma (on the Aleppo road) to increase the UNHCR capacity of registration. UNHCR is expect to have around 200,000 registered refugees by the end of 2007. From January to July UNHCR has registered 69,159 refugees.<sup>14</sup>

**Table 4: Iraqi Population by Religion Registered at the UNHCR, as of 5 August 2007**

Religion	Cases	Individuals	%
Sunni	16 099	56 259	50,2
Shiah	7 558	22 864	23,6
Christian	6 074	21 514	18,9
Mandean	1 653	6 527	5,2
Islam (not specified)	568	2 338	1,8
Other / No data	59	805	0,2
Yezidi	58	259	0,2
<i>Total</i>	<i>32 069</i>	<i>110 566</i>	<i>100</i>

Source: UNHCR Syria – *Report on Registered Refugees*, 5 august 2007

Minorities, such as Christians or Mandean are overrepresented in the registered refugee group, partly due to the efficiency of their migratory networks, and the presence of a former Diaspora in Western countries that sustains these emigration movements. As noted by N. Van Hear, access to transnational networks and mobility becomes central for the development of coping strategies.

Still other extended family may go abroad as labour migrants, asylum seekers, undocumented workers, or through other migratory channels to find work or incomes for themselves and the family. Such ‘strategies’, if they may be called this, may well be in place before displacement, but the portfolio of strategies is likely to be broader after displacement, sometimes of necessity, sometimes by new opportunities opening up. Access to social networks and mobility can be among refugees' most important assets.<sup>15</sup>

The role of the former Iraqi presence in Syria can probably partly explain the important arrival of Christians or Shiah Muslims in Syria, even if the interviewees seem to rely more on kinship networks than on religious networks. The massive arrival of refugees, however, seems to have exceeded the network's capacity to assist families and individuals. Nevertheless, pre-

<sup>14</sup> *UNHCR at a Glance*, August 2007 – UNHCR Syria

<sup>15</sup> Van Hear, Nicholas (2006) "Refugees in Diaspora: From Durable Solutions to Transnational Relations" in *Refuge*, vol. 23, n°1: 12.



2003 presence seems to have an important impact on the geographical location of the different Iraqi religious groups in the Damascus urban area.

### **III. Exodus, Geographical Scattering and Coping Strategies**

In the present case, transnational migratory networks seem to play an important role for some groups like the Christians or the Mandeans who emigrate in large numbers from Iraq. However, interviews conducted with refugees shows some limitations to the action of these networks.

The solidarity networks play a significant role in the organization and the development of the Iraqi exodus, in both the country of departure as well as in the host country. Their action is determined by various stages of a migratory process: 1. they permit the mobilization of the funds necessary to pay for the trip; 2. they provide information on the country of destination circulated through the network and spread to the potential migrants; 3. they facilitate the adaptation of the newcomer in the host country; 4. they also have a function in the selection of the migrant from the departure country to fit the specific needs of host country; 5. they contribute to circumvent the legal constraints in the host countries; and 6. they influence the destination location of the migrants.<sup>16</sup>

#### *The Difficult Reorganization of the Solidarity Networks*

In the 200 files of families registered with *Caritas Migrants* consulted in Damascus, more than half have members of their close family settled abroad (except Iraq), the most cited countries being Australia, the United States, Sweden and Germany. If a part of the families concerned receive remittances of their close relatives settled for a long time in their host country, many arrived recently and are in the process of regularization of their situation or live only with the social welfare. This limits strongly their capacity to send money to help the members of their family in Syria. Remittances, when they are sent, allow covering the rent expenses of the apartment and are situated between 100 and 200 USD per month, but rarely allow a family to live.

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<sup>16</sup> See: Douglas T. Gurak and Fe Caces, "Migration Networks and the Shaping of Migration Systems" in Mary M. Kritz et al., *International Migration Systems. A Global Approach*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Monica Boyd, "Family and personal networks in international migration: recent developments and new agendas", *International Migration Review*, (1989) Vol. 23, Fall, n°87; Ivan Light et al., "Migration networks and immigrant entrepreneurship" in Ivan Light et al., *Immigration and entrepreneurship: culture, capital and ethnic networks* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993).

### *Case Studies*

The following examples show the difficult reorganization of the solidarity and migratory networks due to the recent and disrupted exodus for most of the families concerned.

A Nestorian family who lives today in Damascus is in a very difficult economic and social situation. A young mother of two children left Iraq in 2006 after her husband, who was a photographer and possessed a store, had to stop his activity. They share their apartment with the parents of her husband. Three of her brothers are in Australia today. They first left Iraq to Turkey and then Greece to go from there to Australia where they asked for asylum. Recently arrived in Australia, they are not able to send money to their family in Damascus. They are trying to cope with their own resettlement and furthermore they have to reimburse the important expenses generated by their emigration journey. The family who lives in Damascus has to pay a 10,000 Syrian pounds (200 USD) rent a month. They manage to pay it thanks to the pension that the father-in-law of the interviewee – who resides in Syria-still receives and which is regularly sent to them from Iraq. Their family who remains in Iraq also sends them basic food products, like rice, which are sent via the taxis that connect Iraq to Damascus. The geographical dispersion of the different family members as well as the precariousness of their legal and economic situations leads to a dislocation of the family systems of solidarity. Strategies of survival are then set up, and solidarity networks tend to have their action limited to the daily needs.

A Chaldean family, who also left Baghdad in 2006, lives today partially with the money they gathered from the sale of their furniture and from their savings brought from Iraq. Numerous members of their close family (uncle, aunt, cousin) live abroad (United States, Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and Denmark) since the beginning of 1980s after the beginning of the war with Iran. They maintain rather distant relations with their family abroad and do not seek to contact them to ask for assistance. Of three children, two sons work in the construction sector for 6,000 Syrian pounds (120 USD) a month each, and they have to pay a 10,000 Syrian pound (200 USD) rent a month. Their major anxiety today is the end of their savings brought from Iraq which allows them to pay for everyday life. The salaries the two sons receive hardly covers the monthly rent of their apartment. At the beginning of March, 2007, the brother of the woman interviewed left Baghdad with his wife and came to Syria to

join them in their 2 room apartment. Their emigration request to Australia was refused and they are now waiting for the implementation of the UNHCR resettlement program.

Another Nestorian family from Baghdad arrived in 2006 and is now settled in Damascus in a 3 room apartment they rent for 8,000 Syrian pounds (160 USD) a month. They had to stop their work because of security problems. In consequence, they decided to leave Baghdad. They live thanks to the money sent to them by the father of the husband from Baghdad, around 15,000 Syrian pounds (300 USD) a month. They did not find a job in Syria. The woman interviewed was doing embroidery at home but she preferred to stop because the salary was too low. They left Iraq after having sold all their possessions there. Upon their arrival in Damascus, they did not have any relative or contact there. They were steered towards Jaramana by other Iraqis met accidentally in the street and their taxi driver. They knew that they had some close family living in Damascus but they did not know where they were living. They totally lost contact since their departure from Iraq .While attending the Nestorian mass the husband recognized his sister-in-law and was thus able to reactivate the contact. Later, while standing on their balcony, they recognized their former neighbours from Baghdad. They knew that their neighbours left to Damascus without knowing where they were actually living. They have close family in Sweden, Australia and in the United States, but all having left since 2003, they are not in contact at the moment.

Their neighbours, also a Nestorian family who came from Baghdad in 2004, are living in a 3 room apartment they rent for 7,500 Syrian pounds (150 USD) a month. They live thanks to the money brought from Baghdad and with the income earned by the husband who works in a traditional fast food job that he already occupied in Baghdad, for 250 Syrian pounds (5 USD) a day. They have relatives in Australia, but their request for emigration was refused.

The possibilities to emigrate to a third country are very limited and with the growing Iraqi presence, the proportion of families managing to emigrate is low. The UNHCR obtained a plan of resettlement which would allow 20,000 Iraqis to emigrate towards Western countries in 2007, for all the Iraqi refugees in the Middle East. For the whole region it represents approximately 1 % of the total of the refugees.<sup>17</sup> A limited number of individuals re-emigrate

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<sup>17</sup> "Operationally, UNHCR envisages submitting 20,000 Iraqi refugees for resettlement by December 31, 2007 [...]. The figure of 20,000 compares with a total of 3,183 Iraqis resettled in the four year period 2003-2006", *Resettlement of Iraqi Refugees*, UNHCR, 12 March 2007, p. 1 ([www.unhcr.org/iraq.html](http://www.unhcr.org/iraq.html)).

to a second country like Lebanon, where one can find approximately 40,000 Iraqi refugees or Egypt where about 150,000 Iraqi refugees have settled down. A small number utilizes the networks of the Diaspora and manage to emigrate by getting married to a spouse having obtained a residence permit in a Western country and who can bring his/her spouse through family reunification procedures. These practices concern, however, only a minority of refugees. In the end, Syria appears as rather a dead end between impossible return to Iraq or a clear wish of most of the interviewees to emigrate to a third country.

#### **IV. Iraqis in Syria: One of the Largest Groups of Urban Refugees in the Middle East**

Most of the refugees in Syria, whether they are Palestinians, Iraqis or coming from other countries, live in urban areas. A refugee camp that has been created in Hassakeh to host Iraqis- near the Iraqi border –was closed in June 2004. Even the Palestinian refugee camps – were some Iraqis and Palestinians from Iraq have settled like Yarmouk in Damascus - tend to evolve by becoming integrated into the economic activity and into their urban environment.

These last years researchers have shown a growing interest on the issue of urban refugees in the world, pointing mainly to the problem of protection and access of services they face in major third world cities.<sup>18</sup> The issue of urban refugees in developing countries has been studied, for example, with the case of the Sudanese and Somali refugees whose presence is very significant in Egypt.<sup>19</sup>

##### *Urban Refugees: an Operational Category*

The UNHCR makes a clear distinction between *refugees in camps* and *urban refugees*. This categorization is linked to the implementation of its policies of protection and assistance.

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<sup>18</sup> A special issue of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* on Urban refugees (vol. 19, n°3) have been published in September 2006.

<sup>19</sup> See for example:

- Le Houérou, Fabienne (2004) "Living with your neighbour. Forced migrants and their hosts in an informal area of Cairo, Arba wa Nus", Paper submitted at the workshop co-sponsored by the CEDEJ and the Forced Migrations and Refugees Studies – American University in Cairo "*Diaspora in Cairo: Transient presence and transit territory*", April 24, non published

- Grabska, Katarzyna (2006) "Marginalization in Urban Spaces of the Global South: Urban Refugees in Cairo", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 19, n°3: 287-307.

- Al-Sharmani (2003) "Livelihood and Identity Constructions of Somali Refugees in Cairo", The American University in Cairo – Forced Migration and Refugee Studies, *Working Paper n°2*, 37 p.

UNHCR protection and assistance programmes are generally implemented at the field level. A key question in every project is the settlement pattern of the assisted population: are refugees living in camps, in urban areas or in rural areas among the local population? The exact numbers of refugee camps and people living in them are difficult to establish, for many reasons, including the lack of definition and the dynamic of camps. Should a camp have a minimum size or population density? Should camps have a clearly marked perimeter? Should detention centres, transit centres, collective centres and settlements be considered as camps? Moreover, reliable camp statistics may not always be available due to lack of UNHCR access or presence.<sup>20</sup>

Refugee camps, that focus attention of many observers, are not, according to UNHCR statistics, the main location of refugees in the world. It gathers "only" around 25% of the whole refugee population worldwide:

In 2005, the type of location was reported for some 14.2 million persons in 129, mainly non-industrialized countries. This represents 77 per cent of the total population of concern. Of these, 3.6 million were residing in camps or centres (26%), 2.5 million (18%) in urban areas, whereas 8.1 million persons (56%) were either living in rural areas among the local population or their type of settlement was unknown.<sup>21</sup>

Due to the relatively high proportion of refugees living in urban areas, the UNHCR has decided to develop specific approaches towards this population, who are more difficult to assist and protect due to their geographical dispersion. UNHCR policy has changed over these last years to take into account their specificities.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Refugees' Increasing Arrival in Damascus Area*

The refugees who arrived in 2006 and at the beginning of 2007, leave Iraq due to a traumatic event lived by one or more family members (the reasons often quoted are the following: risk of kidnapping, death or wound of a close relative in an attack, impossibility to work, threaten with death, generalized insecurity in the inhabited district, etc.). Before leaving, most of the refugees get in touch with close relations (whether it is relative, former neighbours or former colleagues) in Damascus, who prepare the arrival by renting an apartment before their arrival, or accommodate them temporarily. Once across the Syrian border, most of the newcomers go directly to their new residential area. The importance of the relations between the Iraqis of

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<sup>20</sup> UNHCR Statistical Yearbook, 2005: 55.

<sup>21</sup> UNHCR Statistical Yearbook, 2005: 55.

<sup>22</sup> Obi, Naoko; Crisp, Jeff (2001) *Evaluation of the implementation of UNHCR's policy on refugees in urban areas*, UNHCR – Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, EPAU/2001/10, 15 p.

Damascus and those of Iraq explain the absence of refugee camps to receive and accommodate the persons recently arrived. There are high concentrations of Iraqis in the districts of the suburb of Damascus (Sayda Zaynab, Jaramana, Yarmouk – a Palestinian refugee camp - and Massaken Barzeh) and a growing number in more peripheral spaces where the price of housing is less expensive like Sednaya, Qodsiyyeh and to a lesser extent in the other cities as Alep, Lattaqieh or Deir el Zor.

Damascus is attracting most of the Iraqis for the following reasons: pre-2003, Iraqi migratory networks were passing through Damascus and have been partially reactivated after 2003; the UNHCR is located in Damascus as well as many Syrian Red Crescent clinics and foreign embassies; and it is easier to find employment in Damascus than in other parts of Syria.

## **V. The Geographical Location of Iraqi Refugees in Damascus**

"Refugees, as group with restricted rights and privileges, end up sharing the social and economic space with domestic migrants." (Grabska, 2006: 289)

The location of the Iraqi refugees in Damascus is strongly related to the geography of the city and its suburbs. As urban refugees, Iraqis are not driven to specific places upon their arrival in the Syrian capital, but they are free "to choose" the place where they will settle, without interference of the UNHCR or the Syrian authorities. Most of the Iraqis are living in neighbourhoods dominated by Palestinian refugees, displaced Syrians from the Golan and internal migrants coming from rural areas. It is the case for three of the main places where Iraqis settled: Jaramana, Sayda Zaynab and Yarmouk. In Massaken Barzeh, many Somalians - another refugee population - are settled.

I will give two examples of local integration of the Iraqis in Damascus suburbs, Jaramana and Massaken Barzeh. Jaramana is one of the biggest Iraqi neighbourhoods in Damascus with Sayda Zaynab, with a high concentration of Christians. Inhabitants belong to lower middle class and poor refugees. By the end of 2005, it was estimated that around 16,000 Iraqis were living in Jaramana (30 400 in Sayda Zaynab).<sup>23</sup> Whereas in Massaken Barzeh, refugees belong, for their majority, to the middle class, because the rental prices are more expensive, this part of the city being closer to the Damascus city centre and well connected to the rest of

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<sup>23</sup> "Assessment of the Situation of Iraqi Refugees in Syria", UNHCR – UNICEF – WFP, Damascus, March 2006, p. 9.

the city. By the end of 2005, it was estimated that around 3,400 Iraqis were living in Massaken Barzeh.<sup>24</sup> Due to the mass arrivals in 2006 and 2007, these figures seem to be largely underestimated, but they give interesting estimation of the important presence of Iraqis in certain neighbourhoods.

### *The Strong Iraqi Presence in Jaramana*

Jaramana is a rapidly growing bordering municipality of Damascus, which hosts numerous internal migrants, like Syrian families and students, because of the relatively low level of the rents. The arrival of high numbers of Iraqis since 2003 strongly contributes today to this development. New irregular buildings appear everyday, mainly four floor buildings. In parallel, small shops open along the main roads. For example, on the main street in Jaramana when arriving from Damascus, we can find today many Iraqi restaurants, and this kind of activity is developing rapidly. A large number of Iraqi bakers opened their doors in the various districts which adjoin this main street. Other types of businesses have also appeared such as Iraqi taxi offices which connect Damascus to the main Iraqi cities, and that the refugees use to leave Iraq. A one-way trip with luggage costs around 250 USD or more according to the size of the family and the furniture that these families bring with them. An Iraqi mechanic even opened his doors recently, and we find Iraqi taxis being repaired in front of a signboard stating "Baghdad." Most of these storekeepers, be they bakers, restaurant owners, mechanics or carriers, had the same occupation in Iraq, and pushed by the war, they mostly sold their businesses in their city of origin to come to open their own businesses in Syria. Besides these economic activities developed by the Iraqis, the construction sector is in rapid development and new buildings appear every day occupying the free areas or extending in the margins of the former constructions. In link with the activities of the construction sector, numerous rental agencies opened their door, as they are the main intermediaries for the newcomers in search of accommodation. The rents in Jaramana range from 6,000 to 11,000 Syrian pounds (120 to 220 USD) a month and are in constant increase according to the conversations with the inhabitants, for a two or three room apartment. A Nestorian mass is practised every Sunday morning within the Ibrahim al Khalil church (Syrian Catholic Church which lends its premises to the Nestorian community), and a popular restaurant settled in the same church distributes meals for the deprived, among which are numerous Iraqis. The

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<sup>24</sup> "Assessment of the Situation of Iraqi Refugees in Syria", UNHCR – UNICEF – WFP, Damascus, March 2006, p. 9.

reception centre of *Caritas migrant* is also situated in Jaramana where they distribute some social assistance to the refugees of whom the vast majority are Iraqi.

Whereas the presence of Iraqis is very important in Jaramana, their visibility through the development of many shops and restaurants on the main street, have generated some tension with the local population and some of the mentionings of "Iraqi" have been banned from the signboard from March 2007. One can still easily recognize the important number of Iraqi shops and restaurants. Many shops are developing on the southern part of Jaramana.

### *The Increasing Iraqi Presence in Massaken Barzeh*

On the main street that crosses the district of Massaken Barzeh we see appearing signboards of shops which indicate very clearly the origin of those who hold them, as, for example, "Our Iraq." The bakers of the district also began making bread in the Iraqi way and the small popular restaurants also began serving Iraqi dishes to adapt to the request of the new clientele. We also find small grocer's shops which sell spices and Iraqi food and pastries. For example, a butcher put a cardboard sign in front of his shop window which indicated that he sells "Iraqi Pastrami." We also find in Massaken Barzeh numerous taxis registered in Iraq that shuttle between the main Iraqi cities and Damascus bringing with them new refugees and items from Iraq. The internet cafés also multiply, as elsewhere in Damascus, and are privileged places which allow for close relations between Iraqis in Iraq and those in Diaspora. The presence of Iraqi shops and businesses has developed in the suburbs of Damascus. Interactions are thus set up between these "transit" migrants and the areas where they settled. In Massaken Barzeh, the Iraqi presence does not seem to be problematic, and the word "Iraqi" is still present on the shops, and the development of the shops and restaurants is still going on.

## **VI. The Precarious Social Situation of Iraqis: Some Statistical Elements**

The following statistics are provided from a Survey on 733 Iraqi refugees carried out by IPSOS Syria at the UNHCR Registration centre in Douma, near Damascus,<sup>25</sup> with some

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<sup>25</sup> "IPSOS market research agency carried out a survey of Iraqi refugees for the three weeks starting on the 29th May 2007. 733 Iraqi refugees were interviewed by a team of 15 interviewers. 47% of the Iraqis interviewed were at the area where refugees request appointments, 49% were at the waiting area for interviews (appointments requested between 1 week and 4 months earlier) and the rest were interviewed in the exit area after requesting a new appointment. The sample size is 733 respondents, 541 males and 192 females. 99% of the total are currently living in Syria and 75% of them have lived in the country for less than a year, with 41% having arrived in the last week." *IPSOS Survey on Iraqi Refugees* (May 2007) – Summary of Results, Non Published.



comparisons with a survey conducted in December 2005 by the UNHCR, the UNICEF and the WFP.<sup>26</sup> The following statistics must not be considered as representative of the whole Iraqi population, but as indicators based on small samples. These statistics – with all their limits and difficulties in comparing figures based on different samples – can, however, indicate interesting trends. These trends are confirmed by the interviews and observations I did during these last months.

*A High Rate of Iraqis Having Family Abroad.*

63% of the interviewees say they have family abroad. As mentioned by Nadjé Al-Ali, an Iraqi Diaspora has been developing for many decades and is constituted by different waves of migrants and/or refugees:

Iraq is a case in point, presenting a continuum of economically driven migrants, especially under economic sanctions (1991-2003) which were part of a political crisis together with political refugees fleeing the persecution, torture and repression of the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein (1979-2003). This is in the context of a longer history of various forms of migration – for education, labour and from persecution well before the rise of the Ba'th.<sup>27</sup> (Al-Ali, 2007: 139)

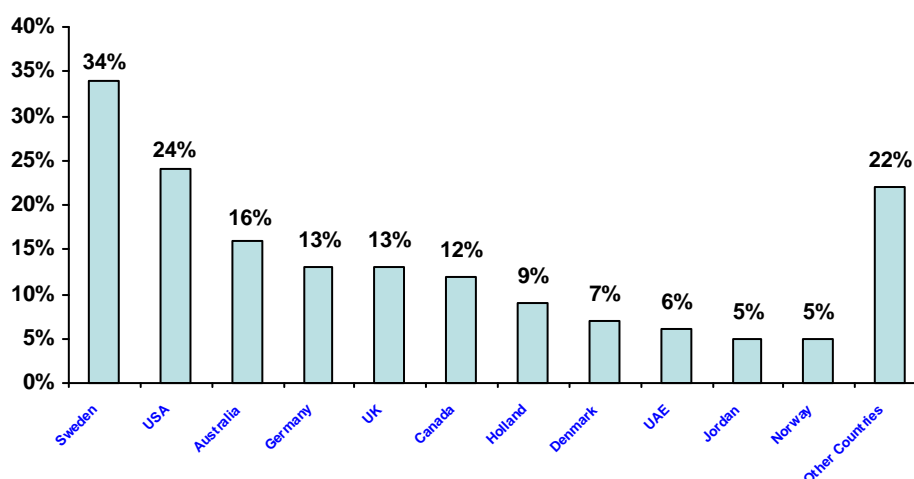
This explains the high rate of individuals having some family abroad, especially in Western countries.

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<sup>26</sup> *Assessment of the Situation of Iraqi Refugees in Syria*, UNHCR – UNICEF – WFP, Damascus, March 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Al-Ali, Nadjé (2007) "Iraqi Women in Diasporic Spaces: Political Mobilization, Gender and Citizenship", *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 117-118: 139.

**Table 5: Family status – Where is your family abroad?**



Other Countries: Egypt- Yemen- Qatar- Saudi Arabia- Lebanon- Belgium- Kuwait- Switzerland- Greece- Austria- Turkey- France- Libya- Spain- Romania- Finland- Tunisia- Bahrain- China- Italy.

Single answer – Base 463.

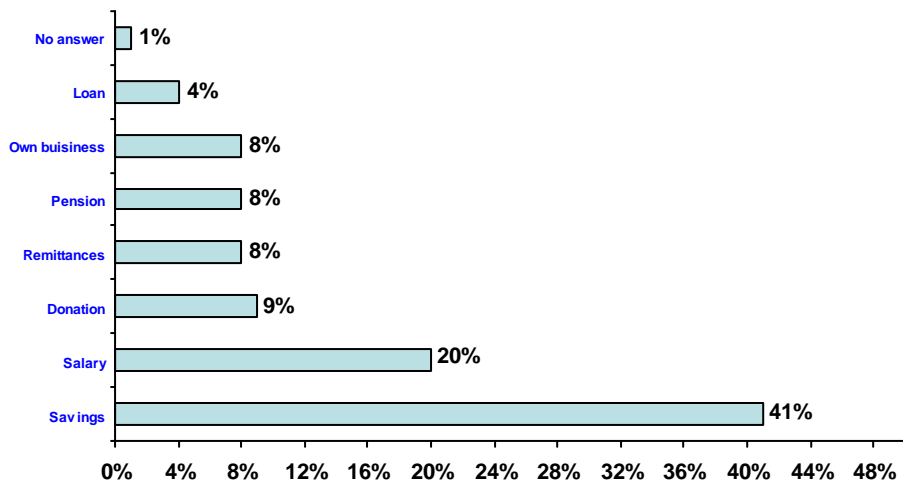
Source: IPSOS Syria, 2007.

### *Unsustainable Source of Income*

If we compare the present situation to the one prevailing by the end of 2005, some interesting evolutions have occurred. By December 2005, a survey done by the UNHCR, WFP and the UNICEF noted the following: “Overall, approximately 36% of the households are earning salaries and wages, most likely from the informal sector. 23% reported living off remittances while 17% are reportedly living off family savings.”<sup>28</sup> (During this period, the number of Iraqis in Syria has more than doubled.) Two main factors can explain the changes in the source of income. The first one is the increasing pressure on the Syrian job market leading to more difficulties to find employment for Iraqis, even in the informal sector. The important decrease of remittances could indicate that a growing number of newly arrived Iraqis are not part or do not have access to the Diasporic networks. Deprived of employment, and not being able to have access to the resources generated by the Diaspora, they rely on their own savings (41%) which is an unsustainable form of income.

<sup>28</sup> "Assessment of the Situation of Iraqi Refugees in Syria", UNHCR – UNICEF – WFP, Damascus, March 2006, p. 21.

**Table 6: Source of income – What is your main source of income?**

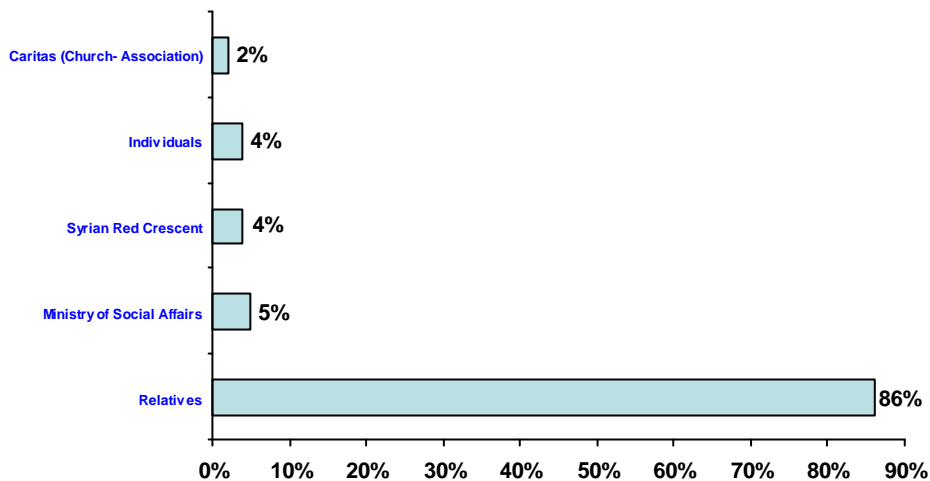


Single answer – Base 733.

Source: IPSOS Syria, 2007.

According to the IPSOS survey, only 11% of the 733 interviewees declared that they receive assistance from an organization or charity. Access to resources such as assistance is a key problem for urban refugees in general. Family solidarity is then one of the only possible coping strategies as shown below (86% persons declared receiving assistance from relatives). Urban refugees rely on their own resources when access to assistance is difficult.

**Table 7: Source of income – From whom do you receive assistance?**



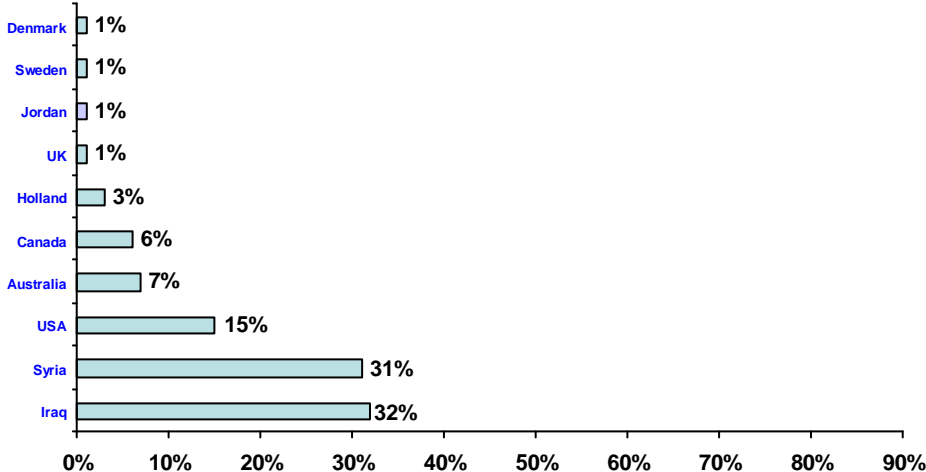
Multiple answers – Base 84.

Source: IPSOS Syria, 2007.

The next graph confirms the - relative or temporary - disconnection of large parts of Iraqis present in Syria from the Diasporic networks; 63% of them receiving assistance from relatives

living in Syria and Iraq. The recent exodus has led to the dysfunction of transnational or long-distance solidarity networks. While 34% declared having some family living in Sweden, only 1% of those having assistance receive it from Sweden. The recent geographical scattering of Iraqis is at the present time more an obstacle than a resource. The re-construction of solidarity networks will take time. Iraqis who have recently arrived in Western countries will have to first settle and stabilize their own situations before being able to assist their relatives in Iraq or Syria. Transnational solidarity networks need time to be built, and necessitate the long-term settlement of a group abroad to be efficient.

**Table 8: Source of income – Where are the relatives that are helping you?**



*Singe answer – Base 72*

Source: IPSOS Syria, 2007.

*The Problematic High Level of Monthly Rent*

The two next tables confirm the high level of monthly rents for Iraqis, as well as for Syrians, that are comprised between 100 to 300 USD and even up to 400 USD for 18% of the interviewed Iraqis. This represents one of the main problems for most Iraqis as the prices are still increasing, especially during the summer period when tourists from the Gulf come to spend a few weeks in Damascus. Compared to the average income of Iraqi households, the rent represents for a large proportion of the totality of their income, for those who have an income.

**Table 9: Monthly Rent of Interviewed Iraqis**

<b>Monthly rent SP</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
< 5 000	5
5 000 – 10 000	31
10 000 – 15 000	34
15 000 – 20 000	18
20 000 – 25 000	7
> 25 000	5

*Singe answer – Base 705*

Source: IPSOS Syria, 2007.

A large majority of households have to pay their monthly rent with the savings they brought with them from Iraq; for those who have a monthly income, they have to pay everyday life costs with their savings. This situation increases insecurity for many middle class and poor households because they do not have a sustainable income to cover rent and daily life costs. This confirms the situation observed in the survey done in December 2005.

**Table 10: Household Monthly Income of Interviewed Iraqis**

<b>Monthly income SP</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
No income	54
< 5 000	5
5 000 – 10 000	16
10 000 – 20 000	12
20 000 – 30 000	5
30 000 – 40 000	1
No answer	6

*Singe answer – Base 733*

Source: IPSOS Syria, 2007.

Based on the fieldwork I conducted, it is important to note that the situation is highly contrasted between the different neighbourhoods in Damascus. While prices remain relatively low in Sayyda Zeynab (around 100 USD/month), where most deprived Iraqis live, prices are higher in Jaramana or Yarmouk camp (around 200 to 300 USD/month) and up to 500 USD in places like Massaken Barzeh. Household income also highly depends on the place of residency. The social background of Iraqis living in these different places is a key element to understand these important differences.

## **VII. Conclusion: Local Forms of "Integration:" Short-Term Coping Strategy or Path Towards Long-Term Settlement?**

There are very important differences of standard of living between the various places of residence, the religious groups to which the refugees belong, and their socioeconomic origins in Iraq. Groups are more or less numerous, more or less organized, or having a more or less large Diaspora abroad. Families are usually scattered, and one can notice the relative dislocation of the family and community networks today (which can however preserve intra-familial efficiency). Due to the massive exodus, Iraqi families and Iraqi communities have to reorganize themselves in exile. The recent geographical scattering of some families and groups in different countries, as well as in different locations in the same country, have generated ruptures in the functioning of the networks. The gap between households with strong local and/or transnational connections and those who do not have access to resources and mobility is increasing with the duration of exile. The vulnerability of the refugees is important, in spite of the tolerant and opened Syrian migratory policy.

Due to the recent and massive arrival of the Iraqis, belonging to different social classes and religious or ethnic groups, it is very difficult to assess the temporariness of their situation. Refugees with temporary statuses can stay for very long periods in their host states, as it is the case for some Iraqis in Jordan, or for the Sudanese in Lebanon. On the contrary, well established refugees, like Palestinians in Kuwait or to a less extent in Libya, can be expelled *en masse*, during regional political crisis. 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. The Palestinian case in Lebanon shows that emigration (or resettlement) depends on access to resources. Most of the migrants belong to groups with high connections with the Diaspora and the local society. Thus, local integration can be understood as part of an exit strategy and, in other terms, as a necessary stage before emigration.