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# From War to Liminality: Female Iraqi Refugees in Jordan

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From War to Liminality: Female Iraqi Refugees in Jordan  
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Introduction

*“In regards to settling down, I can’t really do that. We’re strangers in this country.”*  
-Ateyaf

A region constantly facing political turmoil and conflict, the Middle East and North Africa has produced vast populations of forcefully displaced persons over the course of the twentieth century, more than any other region in the world. Since the dawn of the new millennium, however, refugee numbers have dramatically increased amidst the US-led invasion of Iraq and the civil war currently raging in Syria. While all of the states in the MENA region have sheltered refugee populations, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is burdened with the highest refugee population per capita in the entire world. In 2011, before the escalation of the Syrian civil war and consequent refugee influx, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that roughly 450,915 official refugees (i.e. those registered with the UNHCR) sought shelter within Jordan’s borders (UNHCR 2012). This means that an estimated one in seven individuals is a refugee. As a tiny state of six million citizens (half of which are Palestinian) with no profound natural resources and a severe water shortage, the ever-increasing refugee population cannot be successfully sustained by the Jordanian government any longer, as the Iraqi refugee population alone costs the government around one billion dollars annually (Olwan 2007).

While Iraqi refugees in Jordan find themselves in a state where they are not granted the rights and protections accorded to refugees, they face a precarious situation. While all refugees, male or female, demand attention, female Iraqi refugees are of concern in this study as they bear the brunt of familial responsibility in a state where social, political, and economic hierarchies have been disrupted by the chaos of war. This paper subsequently seeks to provide a brief overview of the situation female Iraqi refugees in Jordan face through the use vignettes from personal interviews conducted in the summer of 2012. The culmination of the study will be disseminated for the researcher’s International Studies senior thesis, using the theoretical construct of liminality. Liminality, as primarily developed by Victor Turner in describing ritual processes, is used to refer to “...in-between situations and conditions that are characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes” (Horvath, Thomassen, Wydra 2009). Though this paper is a brief introduction to the story of Iraqi refugees in Jordan, it is a call for attention as the options run out for this population of refugees.

The War is Over, Now What?

With the onset of the Second Gulf War in 2003, large Iraqi refugee populations were inevitable, as an estimated 5 million Iraqis were displaced throughout the course of the war (Legal Aid 2011). The number of Iraqis fleeing the country coincided with the levels of increased sectarian violence, particularly in 2006 and 2007. In 2006 alone, the Brookings Institute found that 34,500 Iraqis were killed (Brookings 2011). Not surprisingly, there was simultaneously a surge in asylum applications, peaking at 45,514 in 2007. In addition to the number of people seeking safety outside of the borders of Iraq, at least 1.5 million Iraqis were forced to become internally displaced persons (UNHCR 2012).

Although the largest amount of Iraqi refugees originally went to Syria, a large proportion of them also fled to neighboring Jordan, especially after sectarian clashes in Iraq reached new heights in 2006. The actual number of Iraqi refugees in Jordan is subject to much debate, for parties with diverging interests cite entirely different estimates, ranging from 450,000 to one million (Thalji 2010). Of that population, the majority are Sunni Muslim (68 percent), with the rest primarily Shi'a Muslim (17 percent) or Christian (12 percent) (FAFO 2007). It is true that there is great difficulty gathering statistics on the population due to the fact that urban refugee populations blend into their surroundings particularly well and few officially register as refugees, but governments and third-party organizations also have a stake in the estimates given. As the International Crisis Group notes, the higher the estimations given by governments, the greater financial support they will receive from third-party groups like the UN (International Crisis Group 2008). Therefore, these numbers are to be observed cautiously.

Though Jordan did accept this influx of refugees, a crucial distinction was made. Rather than legally recognizing the Iraqis as refugees, they were instead dubbed "guests," meaning they lacked the fundamental legal rights of a refugee, including the right to formal work. According to the 1951 United Nations Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is defined as the following: A person who, "...owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (UN General Assembly 1951). The 1952 Jordanian constitution does state that political refugees will not be extradited, but it does not actually define what constitutes a refugee, thus allowing for much ambiguity, manipulation, and lack of legal protection (Thalji 2010). This absence of a formal legal status for Iraqis was cited by the UNHCR as the "...main protection challenge for refugees and asylum-seekers...due to the lack of local integration possibilities in Jordan, resettlement remains the only durable solution for the majority of Iraqi refugees" (UNHCR 2010). The Jordanian NGO Legal Aid has additionally cited many legal problems that have resulted due to the lack of a concrete legal status for Iraqi refugees, including but not limited to: Parents' inability to provide proper legal document leads to ambiguous legal standing of their children; marriage between male refugees and

Jordanian women must be approved by the Ministry of the Interior, in addition to a fine paid; poverty leads to an increase in divorce and instability between spouses; and the judicial system faces capacity problems and lacks specialization for refugee problems (Legal Aid 2011).

While the lack of a definitive legal status is a concern amongst most Iraqi refugees in Jordan, the lack of access to formal employment is the number one frustration, as seen in every report detailing the situation of refugees in Jordan. Although the FAFO Institute's comprehensive report shows that Iraqis in Jordan are very well educated, only twenty-two percent of them work (FAFO 2007). The problem is that without residency, which most Iraqis are unable to afford or obtain, they cannot apply for a work permit. In order to qualify for an annual residency permit, the usual path is to demonstrate substantial business involvement and growth in Jordan or maintaining a balance of at least 150,000 Jordanian Dinars in a Jordanian bank (Thalji 2010). Even with residency, work permits are still restricted and employers generally prefer Jordanians, despite the qualifications an Iraqi might have. Surveys showed that it is the Iraqi middle class that is bearing the brunt of economic hardship in Jordan, with the poorest households dependent on income from the informal sector and the wealthiest relying on self-employment or on transfers from Iraq. The middle class, on the other hand, faces little to no employment opportunity (FAFO 2007).

Finally, there is the problem of the resettlement of the Iraqi refugee population. FAFO's surveys indicate that one in every five Iraqis has actual plans to emigrate to a third country, with all portions of society wishing to relocate (FAFO 2007). The resettlement process, typically done through the UNHCR, is highly stressful and problematic, though. Most European countries have restricted their intake of refugees; thus, agencies are mainly turning towards the United States, which has proven to be slow in its acceptance of Iraqi refugees. While a lot of refugees attempt to be resettled in a third country, negative perceptions about the process persist, including the following: a lack of faith in the process and a lack of trust in the authorities who handle their cases; the lack of clarification on information from aid agencies; the long process for resettlement; an overestimation of the amount of aid refugees believe they will receive in their resettlement countries; not being able to learn the language of the resettlement country; and, frequent return after the first year in a resettlement country because of the difficulty of adjusting to life there and a lack of work opportunities (Legal Aid 2011). It should also be stated that return to Iraq is completely out of the question for a majority of Iraqi refugees. While most want to return, more than 95 percent will not do so because of the security situation (FAFO 2007). With the state in Iraq appearing dismal for repatriation and the opportunity to relocate to a third country disappearing, a majority of Iraqis are stuck in Jordan playing the precarious waiting game.

### Methodology

This particular project was entirely qualitative, as it was determined from the onset of the research that interviews would be the most productive and insightful means to gaining an understanding of the mindset and consequent liminality of female Iraqi refugees in

Jordan. The quantitative use of survey collection, while useful in some respects, would have limited the project significantly in the sense that surveys are extremely difficult to conduct in Jordan; therefore, all of the statistical data shown throughout this paper was provided by international organizations such as the UNHCR, allowing for a more comprehensive outlook.

Upon arrival in Jordan, the researcher set out to interview Iraqi women who had fled to Jordan since 2003. Due to a previous personal connection with Samar Muahreb, the Director of Legal Aid, a non-governmental organization specializing in legal assistance to disadvantaged populations such as refugees, Legal Aid graciously offered to find all of the interviewees and arrange the interviews. Once the staff at Legal Aid called a number of Iraqi women and explained the general scope of the project, most agreed to talk. While they did not request any money, the researcher gave each of the interviewees five dinar (0.70 USD= 1 JD) for their cab fare to thank them for their time commitment. Across the board, the interviews were very diverse, as the ages of the interviewees ranged from 17 to 70. Additionally, their socioeconomic backgrounds were hardly uniform, as some had no formal education and were living in poverty, while others had degrees in statistics and were living comfortably. Furthermore, in order to gain a better level of spatial analysis, I looked for variance in both place of origin in Iraq and current place of residence in Amman.

The interviews conducted were semi-structured and ranged in length. I let the Iraqi women primarily determine the course of the interview and share their stories at will. All of the interviews were conducted in Arabic and translated to English with the help of two female translators who were fluent in both English and Arabic, one being Iraqi. Although I did speak in Arabic throughout some portions of the interviews and I could understand a majority of what the women were saying, I felt it was absolutely necessary to have translators present in order to ensure that the process was as accurate as possible.

### Life as a Refugee in Jordan

#### *Ateyaf*

Ateyaf is a 42 year-old woman from Baghdad currently living in Sports City, which is a middle class area in the capitol Amman. Although she has a degree in medicine, she eventually quit working in Iraq after she married her husband. Detailing her story of how she came to Jordan from Iraq, she revealed that because her husband was a retired military major in the army, her son was threatened to be kidnapped. After the threat, her and her husband, in addition to their four children, left Iraq in 2005. While she feels safe in Jordan under the legal system, she admitted that her children have had problems assimilating into Jordanian society. Because of their Iraqi accent, they are targeted. One son was attacked by Jordanian children and hit on his head hard enough to leave a permanent dent; therefore, she took her complaint to the UN, as they were in the process of applying to relocate to the U.S. The UN rejected her claim at the time. When her second son was badly bruised on his face after a similar attack, their file was moved along for a little bit but has since been denied. When asked if the Jordanian government

would have done anything about the matter, she replied, “No, not really.” Financially, the family is starting to struggle as funds have run out and neither Ateyaf nor her husband can legally find work because they cannot afford to apply for the residency. She has become increasingly distrustful and dissatisfied with the UN because they will not do anything for her and she knows the family cannot stay in Jordan because there are no economic opportunities. While she wants to return to Iraq, she knows it is not feasible because of the lack of security; moreover, because of her husband’s previous military background in Saddam Hussein’s army, she fears for their safety even more. In Ateyaf’s eyes, the situation in Iraq is only getting worse, not better. As Ateyaf and her family cannot repatriate to Iraq, cannot settle down in Jordan, nor can they be resettled in a third country, their options quickly dwindle (Personal Interview with Ateyaf 2012).

### *Sahar*

Sahar is very distinct from Ateyaf, as she is a 42 year-old from Mosul, one of the few interviewees from outside of Baghdad. A mechanical engineer, she has three children and currently lives with her parents, children, and husband in the Gardens area of Amman, which is slightly more affluent than Sports City. A very spirited and open woman, her interview gave detailed insight into the harsh reality of leaving Iraq.

Her father owned a store in Mosul that the American soldiers would occasionally stand in front of, having no association with her husband. However, because some of the townspeople saw the American soldiers hanging around the place and they knew that two of her siblings lived abroad, they figured the family was extremely well off. They began making kidnapping threats towards the family, calling her father the “Father of Dogs” (a harsh insult in Arabic) but the family just shrugged it off. Eventually, a kidnapping attempt towards her son and daughter was made one afternoon. Luckily, the children made such a commotion that they were released. Immediately after the kidnapping, the family fled. Unlike all of the other interviewees, Sahar and her family fled first to Syria in 2004, as it was closer than Jordan. By 2005, they came to Amman because everything was too difficult in Syria and they were still in shock from the kidnapping attempt.

Speaking about life in Jordan, she said, “It’s so difficult now, it’s too much. I can’t explain how difficult everything is here. The Jordanian people are so kind and loveable...the life, everything is too expensive. And you can’t find work.” Although Sahar is an engineer, she can’t find work because she can’t get a working permit, even though her sister in Australia helped pay for her residency. Speaking about her inability to get the working permit, she said, “Don’t forget that we are strangers, they prefer the Jordanians. Always they prefer their citizens.” Echoing the sentiments of Ateyaf, Sahar also mentioned that her children had great difficulty. Phrasing it as her children “can’t find honest relations,” she related a story of how her son was trying to play with some Jordanian children and they took him to an isolated building and beat him up with a belt. Eventually, her frustration with Jordan began to immerge the longer the interview went on, especially when asked if she felt protected under the law, saying, “I feel as though I am a refugee here. Sometimes, Jordanian people, they make you feel guilty. Oh, you are the reason for the expenses here.” Furthermore, the UN is what makes her feel protected,

for “They [the Jordanian government] can’t kick me out of Jordan anytime they like because I am protected under the UN.” Frustration with the UN also immersed, though, as she claimed she was forgotten and that her family didn’t receive enough money just because of the area of Amman that they lived in. Her family also tried to apply to go to the U.S., but her application was refused.

Finally, in speaking about the possibility of return to Iraq, Sahar sadly responded with the following: “This is...I am done with that story. I have a strong reaction to Iraq. I don’t have any feeling for my home, my friends...I lost everything. Maybe because of that accident with my son. I’ve been here for 8 years and I can’t go back. I can’t begin from zero and start over. And in Iraq, there is no safety. Now, in Ramadan, there is bombings. What would make me go back?” (Personal Interview with Sahar 2012)

### *Sana’a*

Sana’a, an older respondent in her fifties, came to Amman in 2006 after fleeing the violence of Baghdad. She currently resides with her husband and three children in the Sports City neighborhood of Amman. While Sana’a received her Bachelor’s in Statistics, her husband was a full professor in electrical engineering, specializing in laser technology in a university in Baghdad. After the war began, professors and their families became targets, as Sana’a witnessed firsthand in 2004 when she faced a kidnapping attempt. She was dragged through the road, causing bad damage in one of her legs. Once she survived the kidnapping attempt, strange men with guns began asking around her neighborhood for her husband. Luckily, her neighbors covered for her. Then, one day when she was picking her son up from school, they were stopped at an impromptu roadblock. Sana’a began sobbing during this portion of the interview, detailing the horror she felt there as she thought she would lose her only son, as well as her own life. Eventually, they got away and immediately went to her sister’s house. That was the last day they were ever home. Around the same time, her husband was giving final examinations at the university. Within two days, two professors and one student he was associated with were murdered. The family then hopped on a plane as soon as possible and fled to Amman. After they left, they found out from their neighbors that American troops had broken into their home and destroyed most of the inside. Then, many of her longtime neighbors began stealing their furniture and things, in addition to Iraqi troops unlawfully inhabiting the property. Eventually, she returned to Iraq to reclaim their property in 2009 and put things in order. Although she was supposed to stay for one month, she began to receive death threats and had to return to Amman.

Since they have been in Jordan, she has loved the Jordanian people and expressed gratitude to King Abdullah. Economically, her family is doing fine because her husband was allowed to work a part-time position at one of the Jordanian universities. He was not allowed to be fully hired on, though, because they had to give the jobs to Jordanians. Although Sana’a claimed that she would be content staying in Jordan, she admits that she wants more for her children, saying, “Well they like Jordan yes, they feel homesick to Iraq, but I don’t lie to you, I tell you the truth...they would like to have a better life because you know it’s not only deep inside of them. They know that it’s a better life there. They have degrees...they’re people who...they have something in their hands.”

Furthermore, Sana'a admitted that there were moments where she felt insecure in her situation. "Well, Alhamdulillah [Praise be to God] we are not suffering from something but sometimes...I don't know...something sometimes immediately makes you, you would feel nervous in the place you live in...the time you live in. It's not all the time but sometimes." Finally, after breaking down in tears again while talking about her wish to return to Iraq, she concluded the interview saying, "I prefer to stay away from political things. But, we don't forget to thank this country for all it has done...Truly, we love living here and we are very comfortable living here. But, if you try to move our case in the UN, we don't mind" (Interview with Sana'a).

### *Izhar*

Izhar was, by far, the most unique of all the respondents, for she was the only Shi'a Muslim, as the rest were Sunni. A 37 year-old from Baghdad, Izhar's tale was one filled with suffering and discrimination. Although her husband was born in Iraq, he was technically Jordanian, so when he was threatened and his place [he was a mechanic as well as a carpet store owner] was bombed by fellow Iraqis, they immediately left for Jordan with their three girls. However, before that incident, they had tried to leave but once they got to the Jordanian border crossing, she was not allowed across with the rest of her family because she did not have her marriage contract with her. They went back to Baghdad and had to wait for at least six months since she was pregnant. Once they eventually got to Amman, her husband had a stroke and remains paralyzed until this day. Izhar and her family actually made it to the U.S. through the UN, but the stay only lasted three months because the UN made a grave slipup and didn't give them a salary but for the \$10 they gave them at the airport. Furthermore, her ailing husband was not given any medical assistance. The only way the family survived in Virginia was through the support of a Pakistani aid group and a local Iraqi doctor. After not being able to feed her family for five straight days and receiving no assistance from the U.S. government, she was forced to take some money from the Pakistani group and return to Jordan. Once in Jordan, she presented her case to the UN and they eventually admitted their mistake, although they haven't paid Izhar for the time in the U.S.

Because her husband was financially successful in Baghdad, she didn't have to work; thus, with his illness, they have no income in Amman besides money from the UN and various Iraqi friends who know of their situation. While her husband's medical condition dominates their lives and is the primary motivation for her desire to move to another country, her main struggle is the discrimination she faces for being Shi'a in a Sunni-dominated country.

When asked about how she felt about Jordan and whether or not she felt included in the system or protected, she point-blank stated, "I feel like a stranger." Relating several demonstrative stories of her discrimination, she said, "Any cab we go into, they ask us if we're Sunni or Shi'a and we say that there's no difference. Then they say 'No, you're wrong, you're the ones that killed Saddam.' They immediately accuse us. 'What happens to you, you deserve it.' They attack us as soon as they hear the accent. My father-in-law, the first thing he says when he sees me is that I'm not a believer.' Izhar's daughters also face discrimination in school because of their mother's Shi'a background, even though

their father is a Jordanian Sunni. Although she wishes to return to Iraq one day, she said she literally feels trapped in Jordan, with a family of five to feed and no means to do so besides the salary from the UN. "I feel like a stranger, I feel as though I don't belong. Even my husband who is Jordanian but grew up in Iraq feels like a stranger. I can't relate all." Finally, due to her unique situation in Jordan as a Shi'a Muslim, Izhar was the only respondent who expressed a desire to be involved in Jordanian politics if she was forced to stay. "I wish I could. I want to announce my case to the world. It's affecting me, my family, my daughters...I want to let everyone know what's going on." (Personal Interview with Izhar 2012).

### Conclusion

As stated by the geographer Catherine Brun, it is essential to remember that "Even though people have to flee, they are not torn loose from their culture, they do not lose their identity, and they do not become powerless. Refugees are not passive victims in an abnormal state of being, rather they are active agents who are able to develop strategies and thus still function socially" (Brun 2001). What is a woman to do, though, when resources are limited? These women are the caretakers of the family; they feel responsible not only for themselves but for every member of their family. Effective policy decisions therefore need to be made quickly by both international and local powers, as growing refugee populations without adequate support or durable solutions only further accelerate the instability of both Jordan and the region as a whole. In conclusion, this research was undertaken not to demonstrate the tragedy that has befallen female Iraqi refugees in the midst of war and their subsequent forced migration; instead, the stories of these eight women are meant to inspire, for they have proved that more than anything, they are courageous individuals who remain resilient in spite of it all.

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