

GUESTS AND HOSTS

Arab Hospitality Underpins a Humane Approach to Asylum Policy

By Dawn Chatty

Movements of people in humanitarian crises in the Middle East have not been well understood in the West. Consider the flight from Iraq in the wake of the 2003 American-led invasion of the country. Iraqis did not leave when many in the West expected them to, and then when they did set out into exile, they refused to enter internationally organized holding camps and chose instead to settle on their own in urban centers. Today, as one of their host countries, Syria, is engulfed by a bloody civil war, the international community is racing to create new holding centers beyond its borders. Yet only a few thousand Iraqis have moved out of Syria, and fewer have returned to Iraq. History and culture help explain this behavior, which to an Orientalist mind is perplexing. To understand it, we should consider the historical context of Iraqi migrations not only in the past decade but also in the past century, through to the late Ottoman period. The Iraqi experience helps provide a better understanding of forced migration, asylum, refuge, and hospitality in this region.

The United States, supported by the United Kingdom and other countries, launched an invasion of Iraq in 2003 to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein. During the six-month build up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had estimated that a Western attack would trigger the displacement of more than one million people within Iraq and across its borders. They made preparations to receive this wave of humanity in Jordan, Syria, and Iran. In Syria, UNHCR negotiated an upgrade for the El-Hol camp site in eastern Syria as well as for two additional camp sites near Iraqi border crossings. In Jordan, UNHCR worked closely with the Hashemite Charitable Society to set up a refugee holding site near Ruwaished in eastern Jordan. In addition, UNHCR stockpiled relief items at the southern

▷ Iraqi children attending the first day of classes at a Jordanian school, Amman, Aug. 19, 2007.
Stephanie Sinclair/VII/Corbis



port of Aqaba for immediate dispatch should that prove necessary. In Iran, the government prepared ten camp sites with the help of UNHCR. Four of these sites could initially host some 60,000 refugees.

Despite the dire predictions, few Iraqis actually fled Iraq in 2003. No Iraqi refugees crossed the border into Iran. Although approximately 30,000 Iraqis gathered near the Iranian border and requested help from Iran, Iranian authorities responded by sending food, water, and medicine to the border thus allowing Iraqi elders to take charge of distributing the relief items in Iraq itself. In Syria, a little more than 200 Iraqis crossed the border and took refuge at the El-Hol camp. In Jordan, more than 1,200 refugees arrived at the Al-Karma border crossing and found themselves trapped, unable to cross into Jordan and unwilling to go back into Iraq. These were mainly third country nationals such as Iranians, Palestinians, and other Arabs. By mid-2003, some 550 Palestinians and a few hundred other Arab refugees were allowed entry into the Jordanian refugee camp at Ruwaished.

Orientalist Assumptions

Curiously, in hindsight, when the refugee crisis largely failed to materialize in 2003, the U.S. and its allies quickly focused on funding returnees who had left Iraq in the decades before and who the U.S. now expected to pour back into Iraq from their places of exile in Jordan, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. So confident was UNHCR of that scenario that it appointed a special envoy for Iraq, Dennis McNamara, who was charged with supervising refugee return and reintegration. The U.S. estimated that a quarter of a million Iraqis would seek repatriation; the State Department funded NGOs to provide relief support in Iraq that prioritized the needs of returnees. Blind to other scenarios, the allies convinced themselves that Iraqis would be returning to build a new neo-liberal democratic state in the Arab world. Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority governing Iraq after the invasion, seemed to view the country as a *tabula rasa* that could be fashioned as the allies wished.

As late as the spring of 2007 when the international aid agencies finally realized they had a major refugee crisis and millions of refugees on their hands, the U.S. government continued to claim that any refugee problems outside of Iraq predated the current conflict. But between 2006 and 2010, more than one million and as many as two million Iraqis fled the explosion of sectarian violence and general insecurity that engulfed Iraq in the years after the invasion. These forced migrants sought refuge but not refugee status in Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey. They were largely middle-class professionals who found their way to the large cities. Syria hosted the largest number of displaced Iraqis as temporary guests, so by 2012, with Syria imploding amid a rebellion, many in the humanitarian aid regime expected Iraqis to

either return to Iraq or to attempt a crossing into Lebanon or Jordan. This did not happen, however, and only several thousand Iraqis returned to Iraq. Most chose to remain hunkered down in the Syrian urban and suburban neighborhoods that had given them refuge.

Many questions arose from this unexpected situation; why did the international humanitarian aid community get it so wrong? How was the estimate of one million refugees in 2003 calculated? And why was this figure so readily accepted by aid agencies?

The errors were rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of Arab history and culture. Western military strategists drawing up a post-invasion plan assumed that the Iraqi people would welcome the invasion and behave as any Westerner might: flee from areas of armed conflict, and then return when security had been restored. This judgment drew on flawed intelligence as well as an assumption that Iraqis would regard Operation Iraqi Freedom as a liberation campaign by Western powers. What was not recognized was the extent to which Iraqis regarded the campaign as a neo-colonial assault on their homeland. Most Iraqis preferred to stand their ground, shelter among familiar neighbors and kin, safeguard their holdings, and affirm their Iraqi-ness. The Western assumption that Iraqis might flee and later return to recover their property and possessions—as guaranteed by international law—was not one that many Iraqis, or Arabs for that matter, would make. The experience of Palestinian refugees—the catastrophe of the 1948 war and the decades of displacement that followed—has been deeply engrained in the Arab psyche: if you flee war in your homeland, you may not be allowed to return when the fighting ends.

The Iraqi cultural response to dispossession and displacement is at odds with Western expectations of the behavior of the model refugee—who seeks out and succumbs to the ministrations of international humanitarian aid as manifested in prefabricated and rigidly-administered holding camps. Internationally sanctioned and operated refugee camps can fairly be described as places where self-sufficiency and agency are stripped away, where a forced migrant enters a liminal status between citizen and outcast. Iraqis and Arabs in general have a very different mental map of social capital and networks of assistance, imbued as they are with moral and religious obligations to provide refuge. These cultural imperatives, as well as the tradition of hospitality toward the stranger, call into question the widely accepted Western notions of humanitarianism in the Middle East.

Ottoman Legacy

The end of World War I saw the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and its dismemberment along lines proposed in several secret agreements undertaken by the French, British, and Russians. The Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Balfour Declaration set out

the neo-colonial borders of the southern region of the Ottoman Empire. However, even prior to its final collapse, the Ottoman state had been pushed to accommodate the dispossession and forced migration of millions of its subjects within the empire amid the Tsarist-supported movement for independence in Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania. In the process, the Russians dispossessed and ejected the native populations of Circassia and Abkhazia in the Caucasus, forcing the Ottomans to take in more than 800,000 Caucasians. A further 900,000 Turks were also forced by the Russians into the Ottoman Empire.

By 1857, the Sublime Porte in Istanbul had set out the Refugee Code, and created a specialized agency to welcome refugees and migrants into the empire. A Refugee Commission, established in 1869, then facilitated refugee settlement initially in Ottoman Europe (the Balkans) and then, toward the end of the nineteenth century, in the southern provinces of the empire—Anatolia and Greater Syria. The commission was a direct response to the waves of forced migrants who had arrived from the Crimea as well as from the Caucasus, Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland. The commission oversaw the management of international (mainly missionary) aid. But more importantly it set a precedent for how to receive refugees, exiles, and migrants alike. It coordinated in-country aid and the feeding, clothing, and shelter for the millions of refugees progressing through the various cities and their environs to the eventual sites where they were finally encouraged to settle. There were no internment or holding camps; rather than trying to provide basic emergency aid in a fixed location, the Ottoman state encouraged local communities to assist this flow of humanity and to provide hospitality to the largely Muslim ‘brothers.’

In addition, the state set out incentives for self-settlement. Forced migrants who turned into settlers were provided with up to seventeen acres of land to start farming. They were provided with seeds, draft animals, and money to buy farm equipment. They were expected to build their own houses—which they did often in the style of their original homeland—or to get local people to build for them. They were prohibited from selling their new land holdings for fifteen years in an effort to ensure that local investors and entrepreneurs did not take advantage of these new settlers as well as to allow the newcomers time to adapt and acclimatize. Until 1878, forced migrants were largely settled in rural areas. Only later did the Ottomans commence the construction of new migrant districts in the neighborhoods of towns and cities—the Muhajirin district of Damascus, for example, was first established to house forced migrant settlers from Crete in the late 1890s.

The work of resettling refugees in the Ottoman Empire followed certain guidelines: create a frontier, resettle in environmentally similar areas, and prevent any one group of forced migrants from becoming a majority in any one area.

What was remarkable was the way that the empire's organizing ethos was not based on ideas of ethnic superiority of one community over another, but rather on religion. The concept of belonging was tied to social places rather than physical spaces. In other words, the Ottoman subjects recognized the superiority of Islam in the empire, but were also cognizant of Islam's tolerance toward the *Ahl-il-Kitab*—its Jewish and Christian communities. This acceptance was based on religious tenets as well as economic and political realism. In the nineteenth century, European mercantile interests within Christian and Jewish communities in the Middle East, in conjunction with Ottoman principles of self-governance for ethno-religious groups, resulted in the establishment of protected *millets*, communities whose religious and social affairs were organized through the mechanisms of the church or synagogue. It was the legacy of these *millets* that shaped the way in which the great forced migrations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were absorbed into the fabric of the societies and cultures of the Middle East.

The term *millet* (which comes from the Arabic *milla*, meaning religious community or denomination) originally meant both a religion and a religious community. The Ottomans regulated and institutionalized the *millet* system in the nineteenth century. Thus, Muslim *millets*, for example, might ethnically and linguistically include Turks, Arabs, Kurds, Albanians, Bosnians, Circassians, and others. Jews, especially in the northern provinces, were mainly Sephardic—the descendants of those who had been given refuge after being expelled from Spain and Portugal—and Ashkenazi Jews fleeing from the Pale of Eastern Europe; but there were also many Mizrahi, or Oriental Jews. Christian *millets* were mainly Orthodox and comprised Greeks, Serbs, and Bulgarians in the Balkans, and Arabs in Palestine and Syria. In some areas, ethnic groups were fairly homogenous. In others they were widely dispersed. Most of west and central Anatolia was Turkish; the southeast was Kurdish, while the Levant and Arabia were mainly Arab. Yet these regions also had significant Muslim, Christian, and Jewish adherents.

The *millet* system was, in effect, an extension of Ottoman general administrative practice. It was a system that allowed for the centralization of government while also devolving authority to self-governing *millets*. These were directed and managed by the community's leadership. Except for taxation and security, the Ottoman government adopted a *laissez-faire* posture toward the internal affairs of the minority communities. These communities had considerable judicial autonomy; they had their own courts to adjudicate family and civil matters, such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and financial transactions. Intercommunity relations gave rise to a broad range of social networks (and multilingualism) far beyond the specific geographical territory of a residential community, especially among the professional and commercial classes.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries left a profoundly negative mark on the history of human settlement and political engineering. The Ottoman Empire, which had developed a largely successful multicultural and religious pluralism, was gradually dismantled by pressures from within as much as those from without. This demise came quickly although it was preceded by a nearly century-long reweaving of the peoples of the Balkans, the eviction of Muslim peoples from the Caucasus, and the remixing of the largely Muslim peoples in Anatolia after the departure of the Orthodox Greeks and Armenian Christians. This complex upheaval saw an entire empire on the move. The de-territorialized aspects of belonging in the Ottoman ethno-religious *millets* laid the foundations for later elaborations of migrations—between relations, co-religionists, colleagues, customers, and creditors—in the modern Arab successor states of the Ottoman Empire.

With the end of the Ottoman Empire came the demise of a society based on a multiplicity of ethnic groups and religions over a vast territory where movement and migration was commonplace. In its wake, millions of dispossessed people set out to find new spaces in which to live. They took with them the memory of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire as well as their singularly remembered and partially imagined homelands.

At the Paris Peace Conference at the close of World War I, Armenian and Kurdish nationalists attempted to negotiate states of their own in the western rump of Anatolia. In 1920 however, the British prevailed in these complex negotiations, trade-offs, and barter, and gained the League of Nations Mandate over the Kingdom of Iraq—the former Ottoman regions of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul. In 1921, the British held a plebiscite and arranged for Faisal, the deposed Hashemite monarch of the short-lived Kingdom of Syria, to become ruler of Iraq. Local uprisings, rebellions, and armed conflict greatly marred the British authority in Iraq. Even the newly created British Royal Air Force could not quell the fury of some opposition groups, including Kurdish nationalists who saw their ancestral homeland annexed by the Mandate. The British turned to minorities to help police this unruly state, relying heavily on Assyrian Christians to form the country's gendarmerie. Although part of the indigenous population of northern Iraq, their numbers were expanded by about 20,000 as Assyrians resettled by the British arrived from Anatolia. Neutral throughout most of World War I, the Assyrians later took Britain's side and constituted the Iraqi Levies, a force under British command separate from the regular Iraqi army. When the British withdrew from Iraq in 1932, the Assyrians were left vulnerable and a massive wave fled for Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and the West. Those who remained tended to gravitate to the north of the state, a region roughly coterminous with the ancient state of Assyria.

The newly independent Kingdom of Iraq also continued the practice of moving individuals and groups. It imposed its will upon the population by either sending individual politicians into exile, or moving entire communities from one part of the country to another. Dispossessing and relocating communities mainly to the less densely populated northern regions was fairly common throughout the twentieth century. The 1958 military coup that brought down the Iraqi monarchy sent royalists fleeing the country, mostly to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The new republican leaders in Iraq continued the practice of dispossession and eviction on a larger and wider scale. Under harsh Baath Party rule, the authorities could punish an entire clan or tribe with exile due to the alleged misconduct of an individual politician.

The trickle of movement out of the country throughout most of the twentieth century gathered pace during the Iran-Iraq War between 1980–88. Then, in the aftermath of the first Gulf War and the sanctions imposed by the West in 1991, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis—notably of the political, intellectual, and business elites—left the country to escape increasingly desperate economic conditions. Many found refuge in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and in the West. By 2003, there were more than 300,000 Iraqis settled in Jordan. The presence of nearly 500,000 Iraqi refugees in the region was felt in business, the arts, and other professions. The exiles in turn formed solidarity networks for subsequent waves, and helped re-anchor new arrivals without resorting to international aid. The refugees were largely invisible to humanitarian assistance regimes, as they did not seek formal recognition, but rather relied on Arab notions of hospitality and traditions of giving asylum to settle and create new lives for themselves—and all the while reinforcing pre-existing social, political, and economic networks across the borders of the Arab states.

Arab Hospitality

Karam, an Arabic word for hospitality or generosity, is also ultimately about security, protection, and respect. Correct behavior toward a stranger/guest is inextricably bound with a family's honor and reputation; inappropriate behavior might lead to disrespect, danger, and insecurity. Thus, a cultural sphere based on family, lineage, and ethno-religious *millets* constitutes a horizontal network of support and solidarity; here, the movement of people does not result in decoupling, or deracination.

Notions of hospitality, generosity, and the worthiness of the guest in augmenting individual and family honor are fundamental to many societies and cultures. But they are particularly redolent in the Arab world, where notions of modernity are mixed with those of custom and customary principles of behavior and action. Contrary to the dominant discourse in the West—where a typical response to forced migration is to place asylum seekers in centers that represent a middle ground between mere

biological life and full social existence— notions of hospitality and generosity are so important in Arab culture as to make it nearly impossible for the state to adopt bureaucratic indifference to human needs and suffering.

Countries of the region tend to avoid enactment of asylum laws largely because asylum is deeply rooted in notions of individual, family, and group reputation. In societies where providing hospitality enhances reputations for generosity, humanitarian internment camps are unnecessary if not repugnant. The refusal of most Arab states to sign the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees is not a reflection of a lack of concern regarding forced migration. Rather, it is an unwillingness to move against the norms and customs of hospitality that grant the stranger, exile, and refugee nearly the same rights of the citizen. The nation is regarded as the home and the head of the family is sovereign of the state. National legislation is not required in order to treat the stranger as a guest. This is underscored by the wide acceptance of the Protocol for the Treatment of Palestinians in Arab States, the Casablanca Protocol, adopted in 1965.

The Arab ideal is that the state is the host, and hospitality is a matter for the local community and the private individual. The refugee camp is not part of the mindset. The forced migrant is welcomed or tolerated as a guest, generally temporarily but sometimes for a long duration. The ideal of an Arab nation persists in the rhetoric and the practices of some states. Syria, for example, has practiced near unconditional hospitality in allowing all Arabs into the country without visas. In other Arab states, it is easier for Arabs to enter than other foreign nationals. In any case, the host is thus someone that has the power to give something (*karam*) to the stranger, but ultimately remains in control. *Karam* not only enhances the reputation of the host, the act of hosting also creates greater security by enlarging the network (*wasta*) of the host. One day the host may become a stranger himself. The cycle of hospitality and refuge among members of different *millets* is the antecedent to the modern Arab state.

A Better Approach to Humanitarianism

Iraqi exiles and other forced migrants have regularly confounded Western concepts of humanitarianism. The Iraqi rejection of refugee camps as a response to asylum seeking caught the international community off-guard. The exiles as well as their hosts largely spurned the Western notion of separating the asylum seeker from the rest of society. These acts are clearly rooted in the late Ottoman era and its system of *millets* spread far and wide over the Arab provinces. Subsequent forced as well as voluntary migration in the region created widespread networks of families, lineages, and tribes. These considerations of social capital, networks, and alliances became significant factors when Iraqis came to deciding the time, place, and route of their exile. Because notions

of hospitality and refuge operate at the community and individual level—and not by government decree—public consciousness was conducive to positive responses to the need for asylum and security. These social and ethical norms underpin the success of self-settlement and local community hosting.

The Iraqi experience has prompted a rethink by UNHCR and other refugee agencies. Only a few years ago, refugees who evaded camps were criminalized for such acts. However in 2007, largely as a result of the Iraqi crisis, UNHCR issued new guidelines for effectively protecting the self-settled refugee. This effort by Western organizations to understand local history, context, and custom augers well for future humanitarianism and refugee reception in the Arab World.