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Circular repatriation:
the unsuccessful return and reintegration of Iraqis with refugee status in Denmark

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Introduction

As a general rule, Denmark emphasizes return, repatriation and reintegration as the preferred durable solution for refugees. Danish authorities are particularly intent on promoting the return of refugees through financial and other incentives, an intention reflected in the Danish Act on Repatriation, which came into force on 1 January 2000.

Designed to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of recognized refugees,[1] this Act provides refugees seeking to repatriate with counseling and financial support and gives those who have repatriated an opportunity to change their minds and return to Denmark within 12 months of their repatriation. Since the Act on Repatriation was passed, 1,278 refugees have decided to repatriate to their home countries. Of these 1,278 refugees, Iraqis constitute by far the largest group at 306. Of these 306, 73 have ultimately chosen not to remain in Iraq and to return to Denmark.

As no empirical research into the failed repatriation of these 73 Iraqi refugees had previously been undertaken, the Danish Refugee Council commissioned a project looking into the factors behind these Iraqis' decision not to remain in Iraq. The research question posed for the project was: What factors might explain why these Iraqi refugees chose to give up their repatriation and return to Denmark?

The empirical material for this project was drawn from qualitative interviews conducted with 35 of the 73 Iraqi refugees who decided not to remain in Iraq. The aim of the current article is to outline the findings.

Collection of empirical data

In an effort to better understand the refugees' decision to abandon their repatriation, we performed semi-structured qualitative interviews with the Iraqi refugees over 18 years of age. Semi-structured interviews are based on a series of suggestions for questions and require flexibility as regards their order and form. As such, this interview form allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions on the answers supplied and the stories told by the interviewees (Kvale 1997: 129).[2] Using this approach, we used the interviewees' descriptions of their repatriation processes as a starting point, and subsequently asked follow-up questions to encourage elaboration on their descriptions.

This semi-structured approach is only possible if a simple and loosely structured interview guide is employed. Such a guide enables the interviewer to focus on the answers given by the interviewees, allowing these answers to shape the following questions, instead of simply reverting to the next planned question in a pre-written guide (Fog 1994: 118). Steinar Kvale indicates that in general, interview guides may

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[1] In addition to recognized refugees, voluntary repatriation is promoted for people with residence permits on humanitarian and exceptional grounds. Some distinctions are made in terms of requirements and rights. See: http://www.reintegration.net/denmark/index.htm, Annual Protection Report, Denmark 2004. you may want to have the Danish name for the law in a footnote in addition to a link to its contents.

[2] The thematically centered approach is the opposite of a person-centered approach, in which a unified perspective is given to the narrative of each interviewee (Thagaard 2004: 171).

be based on the theories employed or on commonsense questions concerning the topic (Kvale 1997: 129). For this particular project, the interview guide was topic-focused. The initial question in our guide asked the interviewees to introduce themselves, while the remaining questions concerned their experiences during the repatriation process. The guide also included questions concerning preparation for the repatriation, the experiences following the return to Iraq, and finally the decision to return to Denmark. The interview guide we used was composed of the following questions:

- Could you start by introducing yourself?

- Can you describe your situation in Denmark before you chose to repatriate?

- Can you explain how you made the decision to return to Iraq?

- Can you describe how you experienced being back in Iraq?

- Can you explain how you then decided to return to Denmark again?

As research questions are always too abstract and general to produce answers from the interviewees, other than general attitudes or guess work, we did not ask interviewees any direct questions regarding the factors which contributed to their decision to abandon repatriation (Staunæs & Søndergaard 2005: 65).

Instead, we asked them to describe in detail all of the stages of their repatriation process. We then used their stories as an empirical base, from which we deduced the factors which played a role in what was ultimately an unsustainable repatriation. Our semi-structured approach, with the use of a very loose and open interview guide, has in turn meant that the interviews are not strictly uniform. Different questions were posed in the various interview situations, depending on the themes brought up by the interviewees concerning their repatriation process.

Analysis of the empirical material

Considering that the purpose of our research project was to determine which factors in the repatriation process may have prevented a sustainable repatriation for a specific group of Iraqi refugees, we sought to analyze our empirical material by focusing on patterns and central tendencies present in data collected as a whole, instead of analyzing each interview separately.

Given this objective, we employed what sociologist Tove Thagaard calls a thematically-centred approach, in which the researcher compares and groups information from all the interviewees, thereby bisecting the interviews (Thagaard 2004: 158). Thus, the focus is on comparing the statements made by the interviewees concerning various themes, not on individual narratives.

The thematically-centred approach rests on the separation of the empirical material into categories (Thagaard 2004: 159). These categories allow the researcher to identify central themes and patterns in the material (Thagaard 2004: 138). The

categories employed can be drawn from academic theories, from statements made by interviewees or from a combination of the two (Kvale 1997: 190).

In the case of our project, we categorized the interviewees' statements and stories using a framework of ten factors, which, theoretically, can work against successful repatriation. These ten factors were extracted from the work of five theorists who, in varying capacities, work with the subject of repatriation and its sustainability. These theorists are Professor of International Studies, Daniel Warner, Anthropologist Anders H. Stefansson, Refugee-researcher John R. Rogge, Professor of Public Administration Bimal Ghosh and Cultural Sociologist Finn Stepputat. The different factors which they believe can contribute to the refugees giving up their repatriation can be outlined as such:

Factor that can jeopardise the durability of the repatriation	Warner	Stefansson	Rogge	Ghosh	Stepputat
The homeland has changed	√				
The refugee has changed during time in exile	√				
A feeling of not belonging in the homeland		√			
Insufficient information about the country of origin			√	√	√
Desire to leave the exile country as motive for repatriation					√
The household is divided on the decision to repatriate					√

Country of origin is still a post-conflict society			√	√	√
Particularly vulnerable as returnee					√
Difficulties finding work or starting a business				√	
Lack of public services in the country of origin			√		

Fig. 2: Matrix of the theoretical factors that can prevent repatriation from becoming a durable solution, outlined by the five theorists.

In using these factors to categorize the empirical material gained from our interviews, we were better able to understand the reasons behind the refugees' abandoned repatriation. Below, each of the ten factors as outlined by the theorists is summarized, followed by an illustration of the relevance the each factor to our interviews. It should be noted that at times the factors overlap.

The homeland has changed

One factor which may prevent refugee repatriation from becoming a durable solution is that refugees discover upon repatriation that their homeland has changed (Warner 1994: 169). Changes which may have taken place in the homeland during the period in which these refugees were in exile can cause refugees not to feel at home in their homelands, and lead them to forsake their repatriation (Warner 1994: 171).

In our interviews, we found that several interviewees felt as though their homeland had changed upon repatriation. The interviewees gave differing accounts of this experience. Mohamad[3] explains that he expected Iraq to be exactly as he remembered it, but instead discovered that major changes had occurred:

> [...] *in the five years I have been away from Iraq, I have had an image in my mind of how Iraq was five years ago. When we returned, I*

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[3] The names of the interviewees have been changed due to privacy concerns. The interviewees' real names are known to the authors.

thought it would be the same as that image, I did not realize that huge changes had happened in those five years." (Interview 23 & 24: 11).[4]

For several of our interviewees, the experience of this transformation in Iraq was linked to a sense that the people in Iraq had changed. Zahida expresses this feeling as follows:

> *We were told by the media that much had changed in Iraq, so we knew that the country had changed beforehand. But we had never thought that the people could change, yet when we returned we discovered that we were dealing with completely different people to the ones we had left behind* (Interview 27: 7).

These extracts from our interviews indicate that the feeling that their homeland had changed can be said to have worked against the refugees' repatriation to Iraq.

The refugee has changed in exile

A second factor that can contribute to repatriation not becoming a durable solution is that refugees themselves may have undergone in exile (Warner 1994: 169). Refugees, in adapting to life in their countries of exile, will often have changed their behaviour, habits and ways of thinking. Such a change may cause refugees to believe they no longer fit into the society of the home country (Warner 1994: 171-172).

We found that several of our interviewees mentioned that in the course of their repatriation to Iraq they became aware of changes within themselves. They describe these changes in different ways. Mohamad states that these changes took him by surprise when he returned to Iraq and caused him to no longer fit into Iraqi society:

> *A factor that I had not taken into account was that I had changed during the five years I had lived in Denmark. I had changed radically inside, but I did not know that it had happened before I returned to Iraq. When I returned to Iraq, I realized that I no longer fit into the Iraqi society* (Interview 23 & 24: 12).

Several of the interviewees describe how these changes were a result of the time they had spent in Denmark, and the influence that Danish society and culture had exerted upon them. Natik explains how his changed view on certain issues made it difficult for him to stay in Iraq. Because he had experienced life in a democracy, with freedom of speech, he had difficulties adapting to life back in Iraq:

> *If I had not lived in Denmark, and had not experienced justice and democracy and freedom of speech, then maybe I could have dealt with the state of things in Iraq. But since I had experienced these things in Denmark, it became difficult to live with how things were in Iraq. I could not take it* (Interview 11 & 12: 8-9).

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[4] All the quotes from the interviews are translated from the Danish originals.

The above quotes indicate that some refugees we interviewed believe themselves to have changed in exile, an experience which, based on our findings, can be said to have contributed to the abandonment of their repatriation.

A feeling of being an outsider in the homeland

A third factor that can jeopardize the sustainability of repatriation is that upon repatriation refugees may realize that they feel like strangers in their country of origin (Stefansson 2003: 27). The population in the home country may reinforce this feeling of not belonging, by treating the returnees as strangers or foreigners (Stefansson 2003: 33). The feeling of not belonging can be even stronger for children of refugees, born in exile, who are in effect "returning" to a place they have never seen (Stefansson 2003: 28).

Several of our interviewees refer to a feeling of not belonging and of being strangers in Iraq upon their return. Hisham was seized by the feeling of being an outsider when he returned to Iraq. He states:

> *I can tell you that from the start I felt like a stranger in my own country.*" (Interview 10: 1). […] *it was hard for me, I was alone. I could not mix with the others* (Interview 10: 8).

As mentioned, Stefansson point out that one reason why refugees who repatriate may feel like outsiders in their countries of origin, is that the remaining population in that country treats the returnees as strangers or foreigners (Stefansson 2003: 33). This experience is described by several of our interviewees. For Amed, the feeling of not belonging was not primarily from within, but was caused by other Iraqis seeing him as a foreigner. Amed explains that it was difficult for him to come to terms with the fact that other Iraqis did not consider him to be a fellow Iraqi:

> *When you are considered a stranger in your own country it is very difficult* (Interview 25: 4).

Amira too describes that she experienced a constant focus on her and her family as being outsiders and not Iraqis. She states:

> […] *the whole street, the whole town, knew that we were from Denmark. You can become quite annoyed when you walk out in the street and you hear: there goes the Danish girl. I am an Iraqi, yet they called me the Danish girl* (Interview 20: 6).

This perception that Amira was not a 'real' Iraqi followed her to school:

> *For example in the school they did not call me Amira, they called me the Danish girl* (Interview 20: 3-4).

The constant reminder that Amira and her family were perceived to be outsiders, and not true Iraqis, caused Amira to feel she did not belong in her own country of origin. She describes this feeling as such:

> *You feel like you are an outsider in your own country, even when you are inside it* (Interview 20: 3-4).

As noted above, a further reason for returnees to feel like outsiders in their home country, is that some may in fact have grown up in exile, and are arriving in a 'home land' they have never seen. Sixteen-year-old Ban, who was raised in Denmark, explains that even before her family travelled to Iraq, she felt like she was returning to an unknown country. She describes her thoughts:

> *I was going to meet strange people and live in a strange country that I did not know, even though it was my own country* (Interview 7: 3).

For Ban, the repatriation was not a homecoming to her own country, but rather a journey to a new and strange land.

These excerpts from interviews indicate that the feeling of "not belonging" as described by Stefansson can be understood to have contributed to the abandonment of the repatriation by this group of Iraqi refugees.

Insufficient information about the country of origin

A fourth factor behind failed repatriation, which is highlighted by John R. Rogge, Bimal Ghosh, and Finn Stepputat, is that refugees may lack adequate information about the circumstances in their countries of origin prior to their repatriation. We found that several of our interviewees mentioned not having had sufficient information about the situation in Iraq before they made the decision to return.

A possible reason behind the lack of information provided to refugees about their country of origin can be the inadequacy of official counselling regarding the situation in the home country prior to repatriation (Stepputat 2004: 8). All of the refugees we interviewed attended a mandatory counselling session with the Danish Refugee Council prior to repatriating. However, several of the interviewees pointed to some weaknesses in this counselling, specifically regarding the security situation in Iraq. Abdulsalam describes the counselling session as follows

> *Everything we talked about was purely social and financial and there was nothing regarding the security situation in the country* (Interview 3: 3).

Abdulsalam's wife, Zainab, also maintains that she experienced a lack of information concerning the security situation in Iraq in the counselling they received from the Danish Refugee Council:

> *They did not say anything at all about how the situation was in Iraq regarding security* (Interview 4: 1).

Other interviewees indicated that the reason they did not have adequate information about the security situation, was that they were not willing to listen to the advice given to them by the Refugee Council. Said explains that he refused to listen to what

the Refugee Council advisor had to say, because his only interest was to return to Iraq as quickly as possible:

> *They said that they would like to explain to me about the rules for repatriation and the situation in the country. I said to them that I know it all, I don't need advice. Because my only thought was that I wanted to travel to Iraq as fast as possible* (Interview 14: 6).

Said was simply not interested in listening to advice. Natik too describes his unwillingness to listen:

> […] *I did not listen to what they said. I did not want to hear the advice. Because I was so focused on the thought of returning, I was looking forward to returning as quickly as possible* (Interview 11 & 12: 4).

Several of our interviewees thus lacked information about the situation in Iraq prior to their repatriation, because they were unwilling to listen to the advice, which was in fact available.

A lack of information for refugees regarding the circumstances in their countries of origin prior to repatriation, as experienced by some of our interviewees, may contribute to the decision of refugees to abandon their repatriation. Our empirical material further illustrates that even though there may be adequate information concerning these circumstances available to the refugees, they may choose not to hear it as they are very determined to return to their country of origin.

Desire to leave the country of exile

A fifth factor that can play a role in the decision of refugees to abandon their repatriation is if the original decision to repatriate was based on a desire to leave the country of exile. This factor can contribute to the failure of repatriation as a durable solution, because the refugees choose to repatriate based on the negative motivation of getting away from the country of exile, rather than a positive desire to return to their home country. This strong desire to leave the country of exile may be caused by direct or indirect pressure from the country of exile for the refugees to return home (Stepputat 2004: 5).

We found that several of the interviewees referred to a desire to leave Denmark as a primary reason for repatriation, as opposed to an actual desire to return to Iraq. Some of our interviewees describe a feeling of being indirectly pressured by the Danish state to return to Iraq, due to the adverse economic conditions under which they lived as refugees in Denmark.

Rania expresses this sentiment clearly, as throughout the interview she focused on how difficult the financial situation was for her and her family in Denmark before their decision to return to Iraq. She describes their situation as such:

> *We were seven people in our family, and they gave us 900 kroner a week[5]. We have talked to them at the council and told them it is not enough (*Interview 23 & 24: 2).

Rania's husband, Mohamad, explains that this financial situation became too much for them, because his wife was becoming emotionally worn down by the economic difficulties, and that this led to their decision to repatriate. He notes:

> *Every day she would cry,* so *I could no longer bear this situation. Therefore, we decided that we should return to Iraq* (Interview 23 & 24: 4).

Mohamad and Rania were unable to survive on the income they were given by the Danish municipality in which they were living, and these financial difficulties caused them to leave Denmark. Mohamad says:

> *We talked about it together. It was like choosing between two equally bad options, in Iraq the security is bad, and in Denmark we don't have enough food to eat* (Interview 23 & 24: 6).

They thus chose to repatriate based on a desire to escape their difficult financial situation in Denmark, rather than due to a genuine wish to return to Iraq.

Hamza indicates that the strict rules for family reunification in Denmark indirectly led him to return to Iraq. He was unable to bring his wife with him to Denmark, and therefore he saw no other way than to return to Iraq if he wanted to live with her. Hamza explains:

> *Well, I thought that now that Saddam Hussein has been removed, the possibility for bringing my wife to Denmark was almost zero, it was impossible. Therefore I had to go back to Iraq, to be with her* (Interview 9: 2).

Hamza thus chose to return to Iraq, because the Danish rules of family reunification meant that he could not bring his wife to Denmark.

Other interviewees mentioned they felt that the caseworkers assigned to them by their local council, actively contributed to creating adverse conditions for them in Denmark, which in turn caused them to repatriate. For example, Ali mentions how, in his opinion, his caseworker, as well as another council employee, prevented him from creating a life in Denmark, because they made it difficult for him to find work:

> […] *a crucial thing for a person here in Denmark is to have a job. And when the job centre wants to prevent me from getting a job, then I cannot live* (Interview 8: 2).

He further states:

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[5] This low amount is because only Mohamad, Rania's husband, was receiving social benefits, and that the council would deduct money from his allowance every time Rania failed to show up for job training. She was often unable to go, as she had to stay home with their five children, whom they could not afford to put in daycare.

> […] *because of all this pressure which I was faced with here for two years, my only purpose was to leave Denmark. I did not think any further* (Interview 8: 2).

Ali felt that his caseworker and another council employee indirectly pressured him to repatriate by thwarting his attempts to find work and build a life in Denmark. Basheer indicates that his caseworker made life in Denmark difficult for him. He states:

> *He attacked me psychologically. He pressured me to return. For example he offered me a fridge and a television if only I would return to Iraq* (Interview 30: 4).

It was this direct pressure from his caseworker, which led Basheer to want to leave Denmark. He further states:

> *It was the caseworker who drove me so far out that I could see no hope in Denmark. There was no other way out than to leave Denmark* (Interview 30: 1).

Several other of our interviewees experienced being pressured into leaving Denmark. Most describe this pressure as indirect, in the form of the adverse living conditions they were subject to in Denmark.

The above excerpts from our empirical material indicate that a desire to leave the country of exile can serve as a motive for choosing repatriation.

The household is divided on the decision to repatriate

A sixth factor which can play a role in an abandoned attempt at repatriation is disagreement within the household regarding repatriation. Stepputat points out that men and women may have differing wishes concerning repatriation, and that different generations within the family may have different opinions on the subject. These differences can contribute to the failure of repatriation as a durable solution, as not all the members of the family or household are interested in working to make the repatriation a success (Stepputat 2004: 6).

Several of our interviewees point out that there were disagreements within their households concerning the choice to return to Iraq. Due to possible differences in gender roles in the country of exile and home country, the opportunities for women are often greater in the country of exile.

Men on the other hand may see repatriation as a way to re-establish the gender roles which existed before they became refugees, thereby allowing them to resume their role as breadwinner and head of the household (Stepputat 2004: 6). Among our interviewees, in those families in which we found there were disagreements regarding the decision to repatriate, it had mostly been the man who wished to return. Yakdan describes how he made the choice to return, even though his family was not in agreement on the matter:

> *Actually none of them wanted to return to Iraq at the time, but I made the decision* (Interview 15: 3).

Tarik too explains that in his household, he made the decision to repatriate even though his family was against it:

> […] *I made the decision* (Interview 1 & 2: 4).

He explains the fact that he made the decision unilaterally, with the fact that he is the male head of the household:

> *With the Arabic people, the man wears the pants* (Interview 1 & 2: 4).

As such, women were often forced to compromise regarding their desire to remain in Denmark. Tarik's wife, Maryam states:

> *At first, I refused to go back, but I missed my family, and eight years is a long time* (Interview 1 & 2: 3).

Yakdan's wife, Noor, also explains that she eventually had to give in to her husband's wish to repatriate:

> *I told him that he would regret it, and that we should just go there for a holiday, that we did not have to go permanently, but he said no, and said that we had to return now because Saddam Hussein was gone* (Interview 16: 1).

Only Sadiq indicated that it was in fact his wife, Zainab, who through a powerful wish to return to Iraq, convinced him to go along with repatriation. He states:

> *She was the one who insisted that we should go back to Iraq. She kept on doing that, and therefore I had to accept it* (Interview 28: 2).

As regards generational differences in opinion concerning repatriation, the younger members of the household will often have better opportunities in the country of exile than the country of origin. This is largely because they have better adapted to life in the country of exile, where there are often better educational opportunities.

Older members of the household, who may have faced more difficulties adapting to life in the country of exile, may believe that the advantages connected with repatriation include reclaiming property as well as becoming part of a social network in the home country (Stepputat 2004: 6). A few of our younger interviewees mentioned there were disagreements between them and their parents regarding the decision to return. Sufjan describes how he tried to explain to his parents that he did not want to go back to Iraq:

> *I tried every way to tell them that it was not good for me to return to Iraq because I had started school and had started to have a life here in Denmark. But they said no and that we had to return to Iraq* (Interview 17: 1).

Sufjan further explains that he was forced to repatriate with his parents, because he was still a minor at the time:

> *When we left I was not 18 year old, if I had been 18 I would not have agreed to go with them* (Interview 17: 4).

In other cases, the children were also opposed to repatriation, but they did not voice their disagreement, in an effort to avoid contradicting their parents. As Safia puts it:

> […] *I was not onboard with my parent's idea about returning to Iraq.* […] *Not at all. But I did not say anything. I did not tell my parents that I did not want to go to Iraq* (Interview 13: 1).

As illustrated by our interviews, the division within households regarding the decision to repatriate is likely a contributing factor to the un-sustainability of the Iraqis' repatriation.

Country of origin is a post-conflict society

A seventh factor which can contribute to repatriation not becoming a durable solution is that many refugees return to a post-conflict society which is still affected by unrest and friction, and where their physical safety may be endangered. This lack of safety can play a role in the refugees choosing to give up their repatriation, because they do not feel safe in their home country (Rogge 1994: 36-37; Ghosh 2000b: 201; Stepputat 2004: 11).

Several of our interviewees describe the experience of returning to a society, which continues to be characterized by unrest and uncertainty. They describe their experiences of returning to a post-conflict society in varying ways. Mohamad and Rania noted that the conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims was a particular problem for their repatriation as Rania is Shiite and Mohamad is Sunni. Mohamad states:

> *Before this was not a problem, but now if we live in a place where the majority are Shiite, then I will have problems because I am not Shiite, and on the contrary if we live in a place like Baghdad, where most people are Sunnis, then my wife will have problems, because they know what you belong to* (Interview 23 & 24: 19).

Natik states that he found Iraq to be in the control of several smaller militia groups, fighting each other for dominance. This caused him to feel that Iraq was extremely unsafe:

> *People are killed daily. That is the reality that you see every day. There was only one Saddam Hussein before, but now there are actually several different Saddam Husseins. Thousands of parties have been created, and they all want it all to themselves, and they fight each other, and therefore there is constant unrest* (Interview 11 & 12: 2).

Basheer too describes a constant presence of soldiers and militia, and an easy access to weapons. He states:

> *Weapons and guns are traded like vegetables down there* (Interview 30: 8).

Several of our interviewees experienced the violence Iraq first-hand. Zainab describes an incident which had a profound effect on her:

> *The first time we went out on the streets in Iraq we saw a huge battle tank drive over a car and crush it completely and kill the driver and cut him in half* (Interview 4: 2).

This incident took place right outside Zainab's front door. Sadiq became the victim of a highway robbery. He explains:

> *[…] another car, a small car, drove in front of me, and they tried to shoot. So I had to stop in the middle of the road. When I stopped, they got one million Iraqi dinars* (Interview 28: 5).

Due to the widespread violence, several of our interviewees explain that they lived in a constant state of insecurity and fear while they were in Iraq. Said describes this feeling:

> *Well, you go to the market, but you are scared the whole time. Some people may follow me, or they may shoot me. And you are afraid that there may be a bomb there. You cannot relax for a second. You are constantly thinking: they will bomb, or they will shoot, or they will do something* (Interview 14: 12).

Hamza too describes this feeling of constant insecurity while he was in Iraq:

> *We lived in constant fear of car bombs […] so therefore, every time we went into town or went shopping, if we saw a car we were afraid that it was a car bomb. They have bicycle bombs they have put bombs on dogs* (Interview 9: 4).

Because of this, Hamza did not feel safe anywhere in Iraq. Likewise, Natik states:

> *Well, you could not walk past a police station for example, or a public place or a gathering place, or any place with a lot of people. You were always afraid of what these people had under their clothes; if they had a bomb, if they were suicide bombers […] we were afraid. As soon as you see a strange car, you wonder if it is going to explode, or if there are explosives inside* (Interview 11 & 12: 8).

Fifteen year-old Qasim describes his reaction the first time he heard bombs going off:

> *The first time I heard it I thought it was firecrackers or something. I asked my father, but he said they were bombs, you could die from. So I said to him: let's go back to Denmark, it is more fun with firecrackers and not bombs* (Interview 21: 3).

Feeling that he and his family's safety were threatened in Iraq, Qasim wanted to return to safety in Denmark.

As is demonstrated by these excerpts from our interviews, returning to a post-conflict society very likely contributed to the failure of repatriation as a durable solution for some of the refugees we interviewed.

The particular vulnerability of returnees

An eighth factor which can contribute to the failure of repatriation is that refugees returning to their country after a long period of time in exile may prove particularly vulnerable on account of being returnees. Upon returning to their countries returnees are often perceived by the rest of the population as privileged and wealthy, for they are presumed to have earned a great deal of money in their time in exile. As a result, these returnees may be even more vulnerable to crime and hostility than other groups in society. Feeling their safety is endangered, they may chose not to remain in their countries of origin. (Stepputat 2004: 13).

Several of our interviewees expressed that they have, in different ways, found themselves to be particularly vulnerable to violence and crime, due to their status as returnees. Sumaya explains that upon her return to Iraq she became aware that she and her family would be more at risk of violence and particularly kidnappings because they had lived abroad for a period of time:

> *When we came to Iraq, we heard that if you had lived in Europe or in the West for some time, and you then went back to Iraq, you may have collected a lot of money, and then* […] *there was a risk that your child could be kidnapped, so they could demand a ransom for the child. So we were very scared when we heard that* (Interview 11 & 12: 6).

Tarik explains that the threat of kidnapping, or blackmail was a problem which affected all returnees from the West. He indicates that the threat stemmed from a general belief in Iraq that returnees from the West brought a lot of money with them, making them obvious targets for crime. He states:

> […] *it was all Iraqis who thought that when you came from abroad you had money. If you said you did not have money, they would not believe you* (Interview 1 & 2: 8).

Hamza describes how he was blackmailed by a local gang, who threatened to kill him:

> *They warned me and said that after two weeks they wanted 100.000 US Dollars* (Interview 9: 3-4).

In order to escape this threat, Hamza fled Iraq and returned to Denmark. Ali too was subjected to a similar, though more violent incident when he was kidnapped. He describes how one day, he and a friend were abducted by a gang disguised as police men, because he showed them his Danish passport:

We were walking around, looking at the town, and a military patrol, police patrol came up, they were wearing police uniforms, and they asked for ID. When I showed them my Danish passport, they said: we are from the police, come with us. Afterwards they blindfolded us, and then I realized that something was wrong, because I had heard of fake policemen, they come in police uniforms, but they are not the police, they are actually gangs (Interview 8: 5-6).

Ali was thus kidnapped and held hostage because he was assumed to be wealthy. When he was reunited with his family, he discovered that the kidnappers had demanded a US$ 20.000 ransom from his family.

Some of our interviewees further point out that they felt particularly vulnerable and at risk because they were from Denmark, which was part of the coalition of countries that had occupied Iraq. Abdulsalam explains that it was particularly dangerous to come from Denmark, because Denmark was part of the Iraq war. He states:

Believe me, as soon as they know you come from Denmark it is a problem. There is a special hatred towards Danish people, because there are Danish soldiers in Iraq, and they are not popular. So it is twice as dangerous down there for us who come from Denmark (Interview 3: 5).

On account of this potential risk, several of our interviewees said that they tried to conceal that they had lived in Denmark. Takleif did this by never showing anyone his Danish refugee passport. However, this meant that he could not leave his hometown, because it was necessary to show ID at the control posts set up at all the exit roads from Najaf, the city where he lived. He states:

[…] I could not leave my home town because there were road control posts. I could not give them my passport, because my passport is a foreign passport, it is a Danish passport. If they ask me for ID. If I didn't have ID, then they just assumed that I was from abroad. That's why I just stayed in my hometown (Interview 18 & 19: 9).

Yakdan also describes how the fear of being exposed as a returnee from Denmark, meant that he would not leave his home town of Erbil in Northern Iraq to visit his family in Baghdad:

I did not dare to go back to Baghdad because it was dangerous for me to travel with a Danish refugee passport, because if I was stopped with a Danish refugee passport I could be kidnapped or killed (Interview 15: 10).

Amed explains that he strongly emphasized to his children that they must keep their status as returnees from Denmark a secret:

[…] I told my children that we could not tell anyone that we had come from Denmark, because this could cause trouble for us. (Interview 25: 3).

The Muhammad cartoon controversy made life for returnees from Denmark in Iraq even more dangerous. Said notes that he was forced to hide from people who were aware that he was from Denmark:

> *I was scared, because the first days after I came back, my family told the neighbours that their child, he had come from Denmark. And after the Muhammad case, they became afraid of the neighbours. And they hid me, and sent me to another place* (Interview 14: 11).

Shortly after the cartoon controversy, Mohamad, who had not kept his family's return from Denmark a secret, received a threatening letter. He states:

> *One day someone threw a note, and the note was, like, a warning to us* (Interview 23 & 24: 15).

In the note, it said: "*Today will be your day, Danes*" (Interview 23 & 24: 15).

Later on, Mohamad was kidnapped. He describes that a group of armed and masked men surrounded his house and took him away:

> *They tied me up and blindfolded me, and put me in a car with two people, one on either side. They drove me away. I did not know where it was because I was blindfolded. They took me into a room, and I was not allowed to sit. I could not see, but I felt that four or five people entered the room, and one of them asked, in my language, what Denmark is like. I did not understand what this was about* […] *so I said that Denmark is good, there are no problems. Then they jumped at me, and beat me, all of them, till I almost passed out* (Interview 23 & 24: 15).

Mohamad was held captive and tortured for four days[6] before his kidnappers released him. He had not paid a ransom, and is still unaware of their reason for suddenly releasing him, but he thinks they may have feared reprisals from the Danish forces.

These quotes illustrate how the experience of being particularly vulnerable as a returnee played a role in causing individuals among the group of refugees we interviewed to abandon their repatriation.

Difficulties finding work or starting a business

A ninth factor that can contribute to repatriation failing to become a durable solution is that returnees may face difficulties finding work or starting their own business in the country of origin and are thus unable to support themselves and their family. These difficulties often arise because the home country's economy is damaged by extended conflict (Ghosh 2000b: 207, 220). In addition, because they may lack social networks and support from the population, returnees will often experience even more difficulties finding work or starting a business. (Ghosh 2000b: 186).

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[6] During our interview with Mohamad, he showed us the physical results of this torture, in the form of burns and scars on his body. Further, he is having trouble using his arms, because the kidnappers hung him from his arms, behind his back, for several days.

Due to the high level of unemployment in Iraq, only one of our interviewees managed to find employment. Hamza, who found temporary employment in a friend's engineering company, says:

> […] *I was not employed permanently, but I had some friends who have a consulting firm, an engineering consulting firm. So I worked a bit for them* (Interview 9: 4).

Though he found temporary employment, Hamza was unable to find steady work or make enough money to support himself in the long run.

As stated above, another difficulty returnees face in finding work or starting a business is that the home country's economy is damaged due to extended conflict (Ghosh 2000b: 207, 220). Mohamad explains that the reason they were unable to find employment, was that the economic development in Iraq was paralyzed:

> *Everything was almost at a standstill, and there is 70 percent unemployment in the town we returned to, and we were not among the lucky 30 percent. We thought it would be easy, but it was very hard to find work* (Interview 23 & 24: 10-11).

Another difficulty is that the returnees lack support from the local population, which often views the returnees as being foreigners and outsiders. This can lead to discrimination with regard to employment and business opportunities (Ghosh 2000b: 186). Sadiq faced this issue upon his return to Iraq. Due to his status as a returnee, other Iraqis were less willing to support his business. Sadiq describes this as follows:

> *I bought a truck to transport goods. But the Iraqis did not want to use me or my truck to transport their goods, because they said: him, he comes from Denmark, he does not need to make any money here. All the truck drivers would line up, and if anyone would use me, they would give me half the money, because they said: you have lived in Denmark, and have lots of money, and we lived under the oppression of Saddam Hussein while you were in Denmark* (Interview 28: 4).

A further explanatory factor mentioned by our interviewees, in regards to their difficulties finding work or starting a business, is related to the security situation. Several of our interviewees describe how the situation in Iraq meant that it was simply too dangerous to leave the house every day to get to and from work, and that they could not leave their family members alone. Amed describes this as such:

> *In Iraq now, you cannot work if you don't have grown up boys or brothers in your house. Someone has to watch the family while others go to work* (Interview 25: 4-5).

Others found that the security situation affected their possibilities for making a living, because the general insecurity in the country made it difficult to carry out business initiatives. Hisham states:

> *If I wanted to start up a company with others, for example, they would*
> *be afraid, and say ooh, we have to think about it. We should wait a bit.*
> *You don't know what may happen tomorrow* (Interview 10: 4).

Hamza found it was hard to find work or start a new project, because new projects are often run by foreign companies, or by the Iraqi government. In order to find employment, it would be necessary to work with either foreign companies or the government, and Hamza explains that this can be extremely dangerous:

> […] *no matter what kind of company you have, if you co-operate with*
> *the Americans or the government, then you are afraid, because militia*
> *groups may come after you* (Interview 9: 5).

In addition, our interviewees mention some practical problems, which contributed to difficulties finding work or starting a business. Rania and her husband Mohamad attempted and failed to open an internet café. Rania explains:

> *We brought five computers to start an internet cafe.* […] *But there was*
> *no electricity, there was no power* (Interview 23 & 24: 11).

Another reason returnees had difficulty finding employment, is that single women faced difficulty finding employment outside the home. Aliya, who returned to Iraq alone with her children, needed to work so that she could support herself and her children. She describes that it was very difficult for a woman to find work in Iraq, because women are generally expected to stay in the home. Other Iraqis in Najaf, where she lived, were unable to accept that women should work outside the home:

> *They said: we don't have any women who work here; you should be*
> *looking after you children. I said: how are we supposed to eat, me and*
> *my children, if I don't work. We need to eat and have clothing and*
> *everything* (Interview 22: 11).

Aliya further describes the obstacles she faced, as a single woman, when she tried to open a shop. Since it was not socially acceptable for her to be alone in her newly acquired shop, dealing with customers all day, she had to pay a man to work for her. This meant that it was nearly impossible for her to make a profit in the shop, as she first had to earn enough to pay his wages.

Our empirical material thus indicates that difficulties finding work or starting a business can work towards the infeasibility of repatriation as a durable solution.

Lack of public services

A tenth factor leading to the failure of repatriation as a durable solution is a lack of public social services in the country of origin. Refugees may have become accustomed to relatively high levels of public, social services during their time in exile, such as access to education and health care. This can be the case whether they have spent the time in exile in an organised refugee camp, or in a Western country. This can in turn lead to difficulties in readjusting to the possibly lower level of services in the home country (Rogge 1994: 34).

In analyzing our empirical material, we came across several references to a lack of public, social services in Iraq, in comparison to Denmark. Several of our interviewees expressed, to varying degrees, a frustration regarding the level of the public, social services in Iraq. Bedoor indicated her frustration that the level of service in Iraq could not live up to what she had become used to in Denmark. She states:

> *If you have a problem of some sort in Denmark, you can go to the council, or to the doctor, or to someone else, and ask for help, but in Iraq there is no one you can turn to, no one you can talk to* (Interview 5: 8).

For Bedoor, it was difficult to adjust to the lower level of public services available in Iraq. Takleif also expressed difficulty in being forced to, all of a sudden, adjust to a lower level of services and to do so without assistance. He states:

> *In Denmark for example, you can go to the jobcentre, or to the council or the caseworker. In Iraq it is not like here. There you have to work it all out on your own* (Interview 18 & 19: 8).

Other interviewees express a frustration with how specific, existing services functioned. Rania describes that she experienced the education system in Iraq as old-fashioned and unsatisfactory compared to Denmark:

> *[…] the school, the teaching, it was not like in Denmark, it was just a big, empty room, there was nothing in the school. It was like the old system in Denmark, maybe hundreds of years ago, where the teachers hit the students. Two of our children they were punished and had to stand in the corner, and they had to stand on one leg.* (Interview 23 & 24: 12).

Yakdan expresses a similar frustration, with regards to the health care system in Iraq as compared to that in Denmark:

> *One evening, my wife became very ill and had strong pains in her stomach and could not breathe, so we drove her to the hospital. There was a man sitting on a chair in the hospital and he had lots of chewing gum in his mouth. I asked him if he could help us because my wife was very ill. He turned around on the chair and said that there was nothing wrong with her. I said: you have to look at her and examine her, but he said he could see that there was nothing wrong with her. Later he wrote that she had heart problems, without looking at her. I said that she did not have problems with her heart, but he said that he was in charge and that they wanted to operate. I told him that this could not be right, and that if this had happened in Denmark he would have been fired.* (Interview 15: 10).

These excerpts indicate that a lack of public, social services in Iraq as compared to Denmark can be said to have contributed to failure of repatriation as a durable solution for this group of Iraqi refugees.

Conclusion

The following model illustrates all of the above-listed theoretical motivations for failed repatriation:

Factor 1
Homeland is changed

Factor 10
Lack of public social services

Factor 2
The refugee has changed

Factor 9
Problems finding work in country of origin

Factor 3
A feeling of not belonging

Decision to abandon repatriation

Factor 4
Insufficient information about the home country

Factor 8
Particularly vulnerable as a returnee

Factor 7
Country of origin is a post-conflict society

Factor 5
Desire to leave exile as motive for repatriation

Factor 6
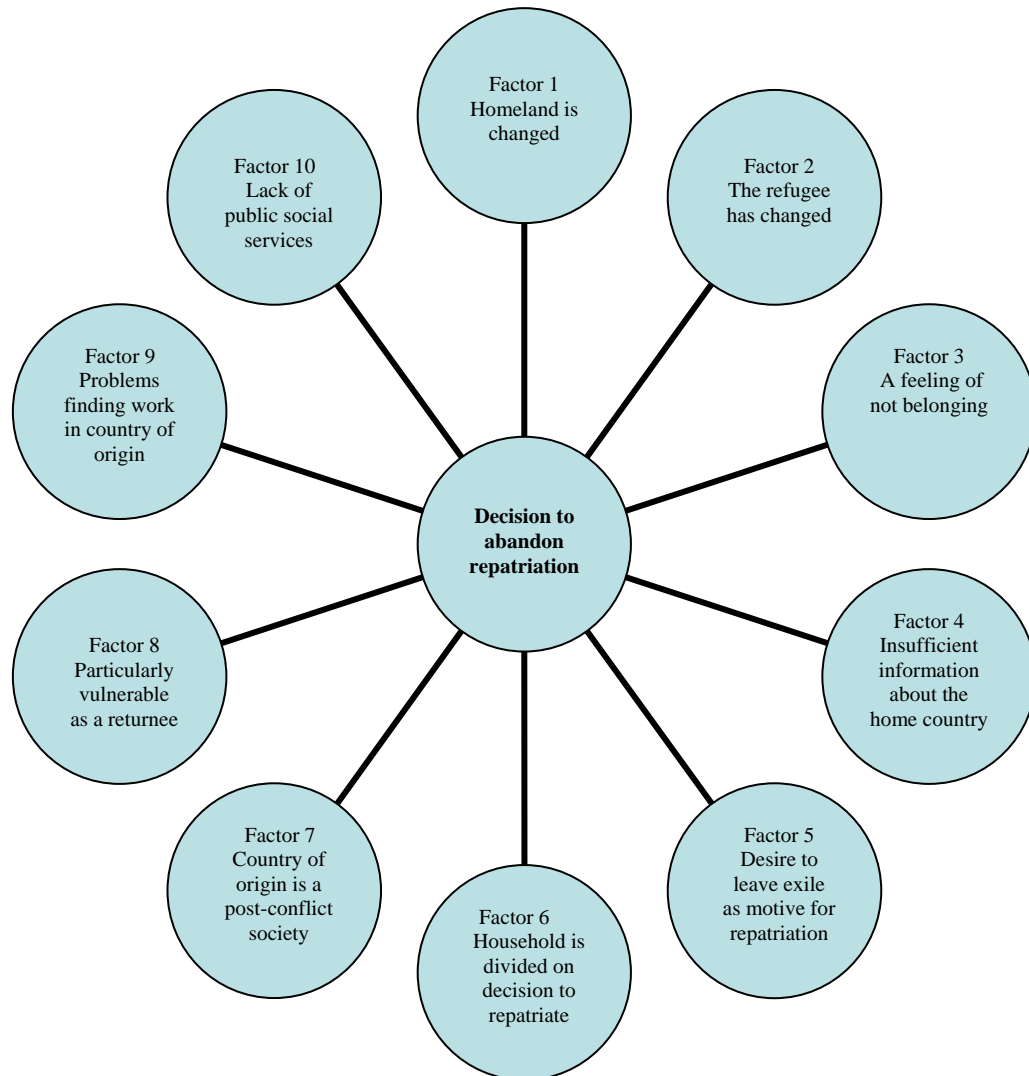Household is divided on decision to repatriate

Fig. 3: Overview of the factors which have caused the interviewed group of Iraqi refugees to abandon their repatriation and return to Denmark.

All of these motivations or factors are present in differing forms in our empirical material. They can thus be said to have contributed to the refugees' decision to give up their repatriation to Iraq and return to Denmark Additionally, given that there are so many different elements which contribute towards making repatriation untenable, it seems reasonable to state that repatriation is a complex, many-faceted process whose success and durability depends on the combination of numerous factors.

The problems faced by this particular group of Iraqi refugees, and the reasons they describe for deciding to return again to their exile in Denmark, illustrate that repatriation is far from being the problem-free, joyous home-coming and final solution to refugee-hood, imagined by many refugees, politicians and scholars alike.

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