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Waiting on the Purgatory: Religious Networks
of Iraqi Christian Transit Migrants in Istanbul

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Abstract

Transit migration has become a significant migration pattern in the Middle East due to strengthening entry regulations in the West. Thousands of migrants from politically and economically unstable countries opt for step-migration, with long waiting periods in the transit countries. This applies to various Iraqi groups who have been fleeing the country en masse since the 1991 Gulf War. Christians of Iraq constitute one of the groups that opt for transit migration and pass through Istanbul to reach Australia and Canada.

Religious networks, in addition to familial ones, play a significant role in the organization of Iraqi Christian migration, as well as in the survival of the migrant community during their temporary stay in Turkey. The absence of necessary reception policies and the weakness of refugee and migrant associations increase the importance of such networks, especially religious ones which provide various services, such as legal aid, medical or educational assistance.

This wide-ranging religious network and the priests' eminent position in this web bring to mind the question whether we can attribute a transnational character to this religious social network which seems to cross over national borders. Adopting a perspective that blends micro, meso and macro levels, I reveal that there are serious limits to the expansion of transnationalism, despite the extensive role played by the Church and affiliate institutions in constructing a transnational social space in Istanbul.

Keywords

Transit migration, religious networks, Iraqi Assyro-Chaldeans, Turkey

Introduction¹

On 1 August 2004, four churches in Baghdad and two in Mosul were bombed simultaneously during the Sunday Mass. This was the first occurrence of a direct violence towards the Christian minorities in Iraq since the beginning of the confrontations between Iraqi and American forces. More than 12 people died and 60 were wounded as a consequence of the attacks aiming Chaldean, Assyrian and Armenian churches. Given the magnitude of the ongoing bloodshed in Iraq, these events have not garnered great attention. Nevertheless, they revealed an overlooked section of the Iraqi society, namely the Christian minorities, and accelerated their flight.

The recent Iraqi Christian emigration, which begun as a consequence of worsening conditions during the 1991 Gulf War, has escalated due to the recent assaults. Aiming to get out of Iraq as soon as possible, they first head off to Turkey, Jordan or Syria in order to initiate their applications for affluent third countries and thus perform a step migration since they cannot reach their preferred destinations directly. Recently, transit migration has become a significant migratory pattern on the Middle East and the Mediterranean basin. Migrants are more and more compelled to use step migration due to the toughening of entry regulations into the territories of Western Europe, North America and other developed countries (Chatelard, 2002; Papadopoulou, 2004). The aim of this paper is to shed light on the transit migration process of Iraqi Christian migrants in Turkey and to scrutinize the role of religious networks in the migratory process. I argue that their religious identities, which restricted their political participation and access to economic resources in Iraq and eventually engendered their exile, turn into a crucial instrument for easing the difficulties they have faced in the migration process. From this perspective, I examine to what extent religion, which is the most fundamental element in their social organization and self-identification, enables them to make contact with a wider world. In other words, I question whether we can assume a transnational character in the contacts that they establish through the intermediary of religious institutions. For this aim, I use the findings of the field study I have been conducting for my doctoral thesis since September 2003, in Istanbul.

I. A Community *en route*: Iraqi Christians

Among the irregular migrants in Turkey, Iraqis have become the most populous group in the last ten or fifteen years, nonetheless the least 'visible'.² The main constituents of the Iraqi migrants in Turkey are Kurds, Turkmens and Christians. The Iraqi Christians, who have been *en route* to developed countries via Istanbul, constitute an intriguing example among the various groups using Turkey as a 'waiting room'. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christians have used this route to reach final destinations such as Australia or Canada in the course of twenty years of constant migration. The Christians in Iraq, a minority group currently estimated at around half a million people (Heyberger, 2003), constituted 3% of the Iraqi society and had double the population three decades ago. This means that some half a million Iraqi Christians have run away to the West via transit countries surrounding Iraq.

1 This is a revised version of the paper presented at the Sixth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting of the Mediterranean Programme of the Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, at Montecatini Terme, 16-20 March 2005.

2 Within the list of ten principal countries of origin of irregular migrants in Turkey in 2002, Iraq stands at the top with 19%. Afghanistan, Moldova and Ukraine follow with 10%, 9%, and 5%, respectively (Icduygu, 2003:18). Despite the fact that Iraqis constitute the largest group, they are not mentioned in the national press other than in shipwrecks or boats caught while conveying migrants away illegally in the Aegean Sea. They rarely appear in migration surveys that have been conducted in Turkey too; if they ever do they are mainly framed in broad generalisations (Kirisci, 1994; Icduygu, 1996 and 2000; Erder, 2000).

The Assyro-Chaldeans are counted among the ancient Christian communities living in the Middle East (Joseph, 1961; Valognes, 1994).³ Christian minorities of Iraq have been in a vulnerable position, similar to other communities in the country, due to the environment of instability present for the last 25 years in Iraq. First, the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988, then the incidents of the Gulf War in 1991 worsened conditions of life. The increasing level of oppression against dissidents in the aftermath of the Gulf War and a worsening standard of living as a result of political instability and economic embargoes induced a massive emigration of Iraqis (Mannaert, 2003; Van Hear, 1995). And finally, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, sharing the difficulties of the prevalent chaos with other Iraqi citizens, Christians have been further threatened due to accusations of being collaborators of the United States. They thus have faced incidents of persecution, such as assaults to churches, intimidation of Christian youngsters, kidnappings, religious discrimination in the schools and other public spaces.

The migratory movement of the Iraqi Chaldean community in the last twenty years operates as both a chain migration and a refugee movement owing to the collapse of the political and social order in Iraq. The blurring of the dichotomy between political and economic migrants complicates the differentiation of labour migration and refugee movements (Hein, 1993; Chatelard, 2002). The same is valid for Iraqi Christians too; the increasing discrimination against their Christian identities in their daily lives on the one hand, and day-by-day worsening living standards due to embargoes and economic constraints on the other, strengthen their determination to emigrate. Whatever the primary reason is, their religious identity is one of the pertinent factors in their departure from Iraq. In his study on emigration of Kurds of Turkey, Ibrahim Sirkeci (2003) remarks that the environment of ethnic conflict in Turkey for the last twenty years acts as a push factor as well as an opportunity framework for those potential migrants who do not have the necessary means to realize this aspiration. Parallel conditions exist for the case of Christian Iraqis; while discrimination against their religious identity forces them to leave the country, the misconduct they have endured as members of a minority group qualifies them for refugee status or for humanitarian protection. In short, being deprived of the most basic means of sustenance, including protection for their life, renders the classical distinction of forced/voluntary or economic/political migration insignificant.⁴

Two factors seem to be crucial in the organization of Iraqi Christian migration: kin- and religion-based social networks. The facilitating and encouraging roles of the migrant networks have been observed in various migratory contexts (Boyd, 1989; Gurak & Caces, 1992; Böcker, 1995; Pessar, 1999). Social networks of migrants are often conceived as an independent factor sustaining the continuation of migration after it starts (Massey et.al., 1998; Brettel, 2000). They have an influential role in designating migration routes and in getting over the difficulties that have been encountered during transit migration period as well. The pioneers of the Iraqi Christian emigration, those who had departed in the early 1990s and now reside mostly in Australia and Canada, establish an important basis of support for today's migrants; they provide invaluable assistance at several steps such as departure from Iraq, arrival to Istanbul, and further on.⁵ Transit migrants in Istanbul benefit from their 'successful' relatives' help in order to overcome the economic strains they experience during the difficult waiting period which amounts to two to five years (in exceptional cases more than seven years). On their arrival in Istanbul, newcomers stay for a while near the relatives who came before; 'veterans' open up their houses to the newly arrived and show the intricacies of living and being a migrant in Istanbul. People without relatives relate what they experienced as miseries, arriving in

3 Chaldeans split from Assyrians in 1553 and united to the Catholic Church. Despite this separation, Assyrians and Chaldeans have very similar rituals and mores.

4 Nevertheless, for the ease of expression I use the term migrant in this paper.

5 By the estimates of the Australian department of immigration, Iraq-born immigrants constitute one of the fastest growing groups, and Assyro-Chaldeans come first within Iraqi population in Australia. According to the figures of 2001 census, the largest group among the people of Iraqi origin, a population of 24,760, is the community of Assyro-Chaldean descent with 40% (9,710 people). It has been reported that over 40,000 Iraqi of Assyro-Chaldean descent resides in Australia by the end of 2003 (<http://www.immi.gov.au>).

Turkey with no one to welcome them or guide them, having to stay in hotels for a while, and feeling especially unnerved by being unable to speak Turkish.

Religious ties constitute a more pertinent means for survival than familial networks during Iraqi Christians' temporary stay in Istanbul. Religion, which is the most fundamental element in the Iraqi Christian social organization and self-identification, enables them to get hold of a wider social network and helps them persevere during the difficult transit migration period, as will be presented in detail below.

II. Religion and Migration

The role of religion in the process of international migration has been evaluated from different angles. The classical perspective conceives religion as a source of social, economic and psychological assistance for migrants' adaptation and integration into host society. Hirschman (2003), for instance, points at the church organizations' role as information-sharing communities, enhancing survival strategies and socioeconomic opportunities of migrants, in his account on migrants in the United States. In the same way, Orlando Mella emphasizes psycho-social benefits of religion for exile communities. She emphasizes the role of religion in enhancing mental integrity in the life of Chilean refugees in Sweden (Mella, 1994). Reaffirmation of traditional beliefs through religion provides cognitive means to begin a new life in an unfamiliar setting where migrants feel themselves alien. Religion also provides a sense of belonging in cases of forced migration; refugee communities embrace religion to reclaim and rebuild their history and culture. References to religious identities and symbols foster the reconstitution of the community (Stelaku, 2003). Recent studies on long-established migrant communities, such as the ones in European countries treat religion as a basis of identity politics. In the European multicultural framework, religion evolves to a basis for cultural recognition and identity politics (Kastoryano, 2003).

These different perspectives show that focusing merely on the private sphere of local community and family or on the broader political framework is not sufficient to grasp the relationship of religion and migration in the analysis of specific case studies. Agreeing with Vasquez (2003), I believe that one should consider micro, meso and macro contexts simultaneously in order to better understand the embeddedness of religious practices and institutions. Below, I will analyze three remarkable roles that religion plays in the process of Iraqi Christian transit migration. Firstly, from a religious organizational context, I will scrutinize the role of religion in creating a social network that Catholic Chaldeans benefit from. Then I will illustrate the distinguished position of priests in these religious networks. Finally, I will focus on the impact of the Turkish state in shaping the boundaries and the content of this network.

A. Religious Networks: Church as the centre of community

The secularization paradigm, which assumed a gradual secularization of migrants and public decline of religion as a result of social change related to the migration process, has been challenged by many scholars recently. More and more researchers recognize the significance of religion and indicate the role of religious participation in the adaptation and integration of migrants (Levitt, 2001, Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2002). Religiosity is a frequently observed phenomenon among new immigrants (Hirschman, 2003). Particularly, soon after arrival, migrants seek to participate in religious ceremonies which provide a spiritual calm to endure the difficulties of adjusting to a new life. As Handlin puts it, religion becomes a bridge that connects the old world with the new (Handlin, 1973, cited by Hirschmann, 2003: 7). High religiosity of new migrants is also observed in churches in Istanbul. Local churches that have gradually lost their original members are now filled up by foreigners. On Sundays, a heterogeneous crowd—including Filipinos, Africans, Iraqis, Iranians and others—gets together in the churchyard and form a formidable tower of Babel while waiting their turn to have their service.

Religion has certainly a more important meaning for a community who is among the religious minority both in the departure and arrival countries. Accordingly, a major source of support for Iraqi

Christians during their migration is the social networks interwoven around church and affiliated institutions. They create a religious milieu that both replenish feelings of belonging and identity, and provide socioeconomic opportunities for the duration of their transit period in Turkey. In addition to moral support, churches provide material services such as chances to meet others, information sharing on housing or job opportunities, education facilities for children, provision of food, clothing or medical assistance and so on. Churches and other religious institutions thus serve as a fundamental source of support for the practical problems.

The central spatial element for the Iraqi Christian community in Istanbul is the church of Catholic Italians in Beyoglu which has been at the service of the Chaldeans since their abrupt arrival. Chaldeans dwell in run-down city centre districts like Tarlabasi, Dolapdere, Elmadag and Kurtulus, in the vicinity of the church and Caritas.⁶ This residential concentration is also remarkable since these areas also were once populated by a native Christian population who gradually left the country by the mid-20th century (Aktar, 2000). Sunday rituals held at the church provide a unique occasion to gather the community together. A minimum of 200-300 Iraqi Chaldeans participate in the Mass, which plays a notable social role in reinforcing the relations among members of community, hence serving as a channel of solidarity.⁷ The chats after the prayer in the yard of the Catholic Church constitutes a lively social field where job opportunities for youngsters are discussed, anxieties are exchanged or possibilities of further migration are consulted. Lunching together after church and visiting the homes of other community members make Sundays a remarkable socialization day for Chaldean transit migrants in Istanbul.

Apart from hosting religious services for Chaldean Catholic Iraqi migrants, Church officials of the Chaldean Church in Istanbul arrange semi-official meetings with institutions like the governorship and foreigners' bureau in the General Security Department. They look up the cases of Chaldean Iraqis in trouble with police or who cannot obtain permission to leave the country because they are unable to complete the paperwork, despite having gained admission from a third country. In brief, they 'keep an eye on them', a situation resembling the *millet* system of the Ottoman period, that is the model of governance where non-Muslim communities were both overseen and represented officially by their religious leaders (Mardin, 1990: 39). As most Chaldeans have no documented status during their stay in Turkey—due to entering Turkey without passport or overstaying their visa in due course—such an intervention before the police officials is of utmost importance.

The eminence of religion for Chaldean Iraqi migrants does not come to an end there. Most of the Chaldeans in Istanbul either work near a non-Muslim, Istanbulite family or rent a house owned by a local non-Muslim. In this sense, the limits of the network inhabited by Chaldeans in Istanbul is marked by Christianity. 'Intermediaries' or 'brokers' between Chaldean Iraqi migrants and natives of Istanbul, who make connections on the housing and employment concerns, are the church watchmen, who are recognized by almost all recently-arrived Chaldean families in Istanbul. Connecting the Chaldean migrants to non-Muslim Istanbulite employers and landlords, these church employees act as a bridge connecting two social networks, in the sense employed by Granovetter (1973). Hence, this facilitates the incorporation of Chaldean Iraqis with strong internal ties to a wider social milieu through the link of Oriental Christianity. As such, Christian Iraqi families rent the houses owned by non-Muslim Istanbulites; Chaldean girls are employed in their households as babysitters and cleaning-ladies.

Despite all its positive aspects, the Iraqi Christian religious social network has oppressive and exclusionary characteristics as well. One should not imagine this social milieu as a setting organized

6 Caritas is a Catholic charity organization offering basic social services such as legal consultation, education, provision of food and clothing to Iraqi Christians.

7 Turkish Chaldeans, considerably shrinking due to emigration in 1980's and remained less than a thousand in Turkey, used to perform their Sunday prayers in their own chapel apart from the Iraqis until bombing incidents of November 2003. Owing to the severe damage that the bomb-attacks in November 2003 incurred to this chapel, they participated in the Sunday prayers taking place at the grand church of Catholic Italians, until repairing activities finished. Aside from this short period there has been no serious interaction between the Chaldeans of Turkey and Iraq.

purely on principles of solidarity and consensus (Pessar, 1999). It also includes hierarchies of power and community control mechanisms and creates an order of discipline and punishment in the transit period. It is mostly younger members of the community who suffer most, since they are better incorporated into mainstream society owing to their work experiences. In brief, religion which serves as an important means of survival, easily develops into an apparatus of social control to enhance safeguarding of communal norms and attitudes and create generational conflicts as well (see 'ethnographic portraits' section at the end for the illustration of such tensions).

Another branch of Iraqi Christians' religious social network is the Catholic charity organization, Caritas, which offers basic social services.⁸ Being a Catholic organization of humanitarian aid, development and social services, Caritas gives support to Chaldean Catholic Iraqis in Istanbul, especially on legal matters; it looks over the paperwork for those who have applied to the United Nations High Commissary for Refugees to attain refugee status and makes connections with the representatives of countries admitting immigrants based on a sponsorship system, like Australia and Canada. In the year 2000 alone, Caritas-Turkey followed up on the forms of 745 Iraqis, as stated in the leaflet of the organization. In addition to legal guidance, they deliver food, clothing and urgent medical aid to the needy migrants. One of the important services is the provision of education to the children of Christian Iraqi families who cannot attend public schools because they lack the official residence permit to stay in Turkey. Basically, they learn English before leaving for Australia and Canada in their foreign language courses, in addition to modest instruction in some of the basic subjects. Caritas and the Church also take steps on behalf of Chaldean men and women to find them employment in the wide informal sector of the country.

Similar religious structures are also present in Athens, Amman, Beirut, Damascus and Aleppo. Chaldean or Catholic churches, and religious charities like Caritas in these countries, undertake the provision of basic necessities for the asylum-seekers and migrants in the course of transit migration.⁹ For instance, Caritas in Amman provides health and education services for Iraqi asylum-seekers of various Christian allegiance. They also have developed several projects for women to work in manufacturing to add to their income. In addition to these services offered by Caritas in Amman, church authorities act as mediators for the visa procedure, or get in touch with the appropriate governmental authorities to get arrested migrants released. In Jordan, although there is no governmental support for Iraqi asylum-seekers and transit migrants, Jordanian church organizations provide basic means for their Iraqi fellow Christians by interconnecting local and international networks (Chatelard, 2002: 21). In order to make a better comparison between Turkey and Jordan, one should remember that the Christian minority has been officially recognized and thus quite established in the latter, unlike the Christians in Turkey.

A parallel religion-based solidarity network is present at the Byzantine Catholic Church in Athens.¹⁰ The Byzantine Catholic Church, which was founded in 1920's by Catholic emigrants from Turkey in Athens, now ministers to the emigrants from Iraq and Ukraine. The first Iraqi group that the church assisted was that which left Iraq during the Gulf War in 1991 and arrived in Athens passing through Istanbul. The Byzantine Catholic Church in Athens fosters a quintessential space of solidarity and beneficence for Christian Iraqis, parallel to the Chaldean Church in Istanbul. Through the

8 Caritas-Turkey is a member of the Caritas Internationalis confederation, based in Rome and represented in 198 countries. Caritas office in Turkey has been founded in 1950 by Domenico Caloveras, director of the Greek Catholic community back then, and moved to its current location at Harbiye in 1985 (Daniş & Kayaalp, 2004).

9 There are several articles on this topic at www.cnewa.org, the home page of Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA): 'Report on Christian Emigration: Lebanon & Syria', 'Going West'.

10 I am grateful to Elcin Macar who brought this connection to my attention. This church in Athens is not a Chaldean Church; still they can be treated as a 'fellow-church' because of the shared Catholic identity. Information on the Byzantine Catholic Church can be accessed via the website of CNEWA (Catholic Near East Welfare Association), a Vatican-based Catholic association (see the article titled, 'Refugees Helping Refugees' at <http://www.cnewa.org/cw28-3-pp12-15.htm>).

mediating role of priests, the Chaldean Iraqis connect what they left back in their home countries to the church in Athens. For example, a Chaldean Iraqi priest working at the Church in Athens acts as a go-between for Chaldeans in Athens and those that remained in Iraq while travelling back and forth between Athens and Iraq. In addition to these local churches, church affiliated charities of the affluent countries have become prominent actors through their projects on migrants and asylum-seekers in the international refugee system. For example, various church organizations participated noticeably, in the period of mass migration after Gulf War in 1991, by transferring an amount exceeding one million dollars to asylum-seekers via the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), as immediate welfare benefit (Ferris, 1993: 232).

B. Organizational context: Priests as the centrepiece of the religious network

In the Iraqi Christian case, similar to other migrant communities, the nodal point of religious life is the religious leaders, who have special importance in maintaining communal bonds and transmitting the long-established values and attitudes. In Chaldean tradition, priests were eminent figures in the past as well, as much as they are today, with a say on affairs of the community life. The priests came to the forefront during the nineteenth century, marking a turning point for Chaldeans and Assyrians. That century set the stage for the great political and social turmoil in the Ottoman territory, and witnessed the destabilization of the existing order that had prevailed for centuries. The two main stimulating factors behind this breakdown were the Western-inspired Ottoman centralization reforms that extended to the eastern provinces and the proliferation of American and British missionary activities in the region (Bruinessen, 2003: 268-301). Abrogation of the Kurdish emirates neighbouring Chaldeans and Assyrians by the Ottoman authorities and the missionary activities oriented to Christian minority dwelling in the region bred sentiments of fear and suspicion among Kurds, which later led to massacres targeting these Christian groups in the second half of the nineteenth century (Yonan, 1999). This period, occupying a noteworthy place in the collective memory of Assyrians and Chaldeans, occasioned the emerging of priests who assumed political roles among Christians, as well as Kurds (Bruinessen, 2003: 277). The head of Hakkari-based patriarchate of Assyrians, patriarch Mar Shimun, acted as both religious authority and political representative negotiating with neighbouring Kurdish tribes and Ottoman tax-collectors (Foggo, 2002: 21). The patriarch was also the leading person in the emigration of Assyrians from Hakkari to Urmiah and eventually to Iraq which was under British rule in 1918 (Joseph, 1961: 163).¹¹

In these years of turbulence, religion-based social organization and religious leaders became even more crucial for Assyrians and Chaldeans. In the course of the shift from the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire to various nation-states, religion became the major agent of the definition of group identity and the making of social structure for stateless minorities like Assyrians and Chaldeans. Religious leaders undertook a unifying role during times of exile and resettlement, which bolstered their social and political power over the community. Correspondingly the Chaldean migration from the Northern Iraqi countryside to urban areas such as Baghdad and Mosul in the 1960s and 1970s was influenced by the relocation of the Chaldean patriarchate to Baghdad in 1950.¹²

Religious leaders also played significant roles in the mass migration of the Assyrian and Chaldean community from Iraq in 1988-1992. The 1992 influx of asylum-seekers, making up one of the major

11 After being kept in suspense for a long time with the promises of autonomous jurisdiction in Iraq under British rule, a group of Assyrians returned to the mountains of Hakkari, while less than a thousand left for Europe and America. Thus, Assyrians and Chaldeans underwent mass migrations even in the 19th century and a small group out of the young males educated at the missionary schools of the end of 19th century accomplished the first long-distance migrations by heading for America, Europe and Russia (Joseph 1961,124). Also, some members of the Assyrians, who served at the Assyrian Levy established to protect British mandate in Iraq, immigrated to England in several waves after 1950 (Al-Rasheed 1998).

12 Jeremy Hein's (1993: 49) argument that minority refugees and immigrants experience internal migration before international migration, has been substantiated by Assyro-Chaldean migration to big cities in Iraq during the 1960s and 1970s.

refugee movements of the twentieth century¹³, consisted mostly of Kurds, as well as Assyro-Chaldeans, Turkmens and Arabs of Northern Iraq. The pioneers of Christian emigration have been mentioned in the reports of those days; for instance, it has been recorded that three thousand people comprising more than the half of the Silopi temporary refugee camp were Christians, that is to say, Chaldean, Assyrian and Syrian Orthodox (Kaynak, 1992: 147). Even at such a sudden displacement, religion was a significant aspect of the Christian asylum seekers; in Silopi one of the three main sections of the camp was allocated to Christians who had immediately established a tent-church.¹⁴ An article published at the time by *Le Monde* reports that 500 Chaldeans lodged in the temporary settlement in Silopi communicated a request to be accepted as refugees by European countries, through their priests (cited in Kaynak, 1992).

Priests stand out as the main actors in the current migration too: they are the most notable personalities of the Chaldean community in Istanbul. Priests of the local Chaldean church in Istanbul and the ones affiliated to Caritas perform the role of go-between between Turkish authorities and the migrant community, as described above, whereas Iraqi priests who spend time in Istanbul on their way to the West contribute to build a transnational social space organized around religion. The latter can appropriately be called '*transnational professionals*', and enjoy high prestige and social recognition in the eyes of the migrant community (Cook, 2002). Iraqi Chaldean priests have attended to the application procedures of the community members in addition to their religious duties. In short, these priests have a prominent role in constructing an extensive religious space.

C. A transnational social space interwoven around religion

Having seen the extensiveness of the Iraqi Christian network, there emerges a critical question: Can we assume a transnational character for the social space created by Iraqi Christian migrants? Although it certainly includes border-crossing activities it is difficult to answer this question positively. The biggest hindrance seems to be durability. Migrants' own achievements do not have a long-lasting effect due to the transient character of their stay in the transit country. In this sense religious institutional space appears to be more significant since it has a higher durability, whereas migrants' familial ties are ephemeral and do not seem to leave a long-lasting trace on the social landscape of transit country.

The role of migration in the construction of social, cultural, economic, and political networks going beyond the national borders has been investigated extensively in migration studies (Faist, 2000; Portes et.al., 1999; Portes, 1997; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). Linda Basch and her colleagues elucidate the process that they have termed transnational migration by mentioning 'transmigrants enacting relations going beyond the national boundaries on the economic, social, institutional, religious, and political fields' (1994: 7). They also mention the tightly-knitted transnational social network that migrants built by connecting communities and institutions in their home and host countries (Basch, G.S. & Blanc, L.S. 1994). Compared to the earlier studies which portray migrants as 'uprooted' and displaced individuals having no ties to the society left behind, I consider the concept of 'transnational migration' to be an important contribution to our understanding of the complexity of migration process. Nevertheless, the prevalence of a binary oppositional viewpoint of home and host countries induces polarization in-between and ignores the potential multi-sitedness of such activities. A consequence of the fact that most studies on the transnational ties of migrants have been undertaken in the countries of

13 The largest influx within the history of Iraqi emigration happened in February-April 1992 as a consequence of the government's military actions in the Northern Iraq, which aimed to suppress the uprisings initiated by Kurdish rebels. By the victory of the governmental authority on Shiites in the South and the Kurds in the North, fearful of massacres such like Halabja, some 460 thousand fled to Turkey and a million to Iran. Iraqis who took refuge to Turkey between 1988 and 1992 were recognized as 'temporary guests' for humanitarian reasons and could not have attained 'refugee' status due to Turkey's geographical limitation for Geneva Convention (Kaynak, 1992; Kirisci, 1996).

14 Interview with UNHCR field assistant, 23.12.2004.

eventual destination, i.e. in North America and Northern Europe is that the studies concentrate mainly on host countries and are grounded upon the dichotomy of home and host countries.

Another characteristic of studies promoting this sort of binary vision is that they fix the *transmigrants* as the unit of analysis (Portes et.al.: 1999: 220). Sarah Mahler criticizes taking ‘mobility of bodies across space’, in other words, ‘immigrants’ changing locations physically by crossing national borders of two or more countries’ as the major indicator in the analyses of transnational migration studies, and reproaches the neglect of the ‘fluidity of things’ like letters, videotapes, and money in this approach, while thrusting prime importance to face-to-face relations (1998: 76-78). Adopting a similar stance with Mahler, Peggy Levitt suggests that extraterritorial movement is not an indispensable condition for occupying a place in transnational social field; for her, even the people who do not move between two countries can be articulated into a transnational space in places where they are actually located (2001: 6).

Whether Chaldean migrants who are in transit in Istanbul generate a transnational social space is quite a challenging question. Certainly, Iraqi Christians, like other migrants, do carry on their relations with the relatives, especially with the ones in Australia and Canada and rather rarely with the people in Iraq, by phone calls, photos, videotapes and money orders. Still, it is difficult to refer to an enduring transnational space due to the fact that Turkey is framed as a ‘temporary’ settlement area, in spite of the fact that Chaldean Iraqis in Istanbul might prolong their stay there for up to 7-8 years. In brief, I adhere to the view that the mobility of migrants and their transnational movements cannot be the main unit of analysis in the case of transit migration. One of the basic qualifiers of the criteria for the conception of transnational spaces, ‘durability/permanence’ (Pries, 2001: 22), does not hold for a dynamic and ‘in transit’ group like Chaldeans where entrance and exit recurs. Whereas, reference to a transnational space retaining some level of durability becomes acceptable, when we move our focus from individual migrants to the institutional level interwoven around the church and affiliated institutions.

Scrutinizing the concept of transnational social space, Ludger Pries states that ‘three kinds of transnational structure might emerge in the course of extending transnational relations’ and he counts the complex regulations and institutional frameworks among these three forms (Pries, 2001: 10). Peggy Levitt, too, writes about the organizational context as a factor enhancing migrants’ religious transnationalism (2003: 3). Institutional structure, mentioned by Pries, is an important tool in order to make sense of the transnational aspect of Chaldean networks in Istanbul, tightly fastened by religion. The thick and persevering social network of relations established through the intermediary of church and other associated institutions, transfigures Chaldeans from a ‘transnational familial group’ towards a ‘transnational community’ of wider scale, in the way employed by Thomas Faist (2000: 207). Therefore, there emerges a transnational social space where transit migrants may be incorporated, owing to the institutional connections cultivated among the church, Caritas and other Catholic organizations like the ones in Athens and Amman.

As a matter of fact, the spread of religious currents and institutions breaching the boundaries of the political to the world at large is not a new phenomenon. The Catholic Church, in particular, is exemplary among the religious movements going beyond the national boundaries with its ‘hierarchical order, ideology of universality and the central structure of leadership’ (Levitt, 2001: 2). Albeit, Levitt asserts that religion acquires a new meaning today and takes a new form in contrast to the past. She notes a difference between the current religious lives of migrants coupled with their religious experiences in the immigration countries, and the past ones, due to the rapidly advancing technologies of communication and transportation. Indeed, even poor migrant communities like the Chaldeans benefit from advances in communication technologies. Catholic television channel Tele Lumiere/Nursat, which can be followed in almost every household in which I have interviewed, via satellite receivers, is a case in point. By means of this satellite broadcast, Chaldean Catholics in Istanbul are able to watch the ceremony held in one of the various churches of the Middle East and the visits of the Pope.

A good example of ‘extended transnational religious organizations’, the Catholic Church managed global reticulation through going beyond national boundaries since the mid-nineteenth century, by means of facilities like opening schools all over the world, recruiting clerical staff and arranging international meetings (Levitt, 2001:11). Compared to other church organizations, improved structure of human, material and institutional networks proved a serious advantage on the part of Catholics in the competition among religious groups at the global scale (Casanova, 1997: 133). Casanova also mentions the emergence of a new network of relations, often surpassing Rome, and hints at the formation of civil society at the global scale, as a consequence of the recent secularization of Catholic affiliated charitable organizations like Caritas and the enhancement of relations among various Catholic networks (ibid.: 135-138).

III. Reterritorializing the Transnational

Writings about transnationalism ‘provided new ways of capturing and studying the ways in which people experience and constitute lives in expansive, deterritorialized spaces where social borders do not necessarily conform to national borders’ (Pessar, 1999: 56). This powerful emphasis on the deterritorializing aspect of transnational bonds sometimes reaches such a degree that the issue of national context completely vanishes as if it had no sense in the analysis of the relationship between religion and transnationalism. Nevertheless, states still have a substantial power to ‘regulate the organization of religious life and its relationship to other institutions’ (Levitt, 2003: 4). A better understanding of the migrants’ transnational engagements necessitates the analysis of the state structures and socio-historical conditions in which they are embedded. Acknowledging constructive discussions brought about by the critique of ‘methodological nationalism’, I still believe that one should take into account the receiving, transit and also sending society settings in order to grasp wider picture about the connection between religion and migration.

State policies and institutional arrangements have serious implications on the migrants’ religious structures in Turkey, too. The ‘institutional capacity’ of Chaldean or Catholic religious structures in Turkey is not very strong, compared to American and European cases. In the United States, the absence of state religion, the religiously pluralist setting and the highly religious society provide a favourable environment for religious congregations working in favour of migrant communities in addition to encouraging migrants’ religious participation (Hirschman, 2003). The highly secular European system on the contrary does not encourage migrants’ religious activities (the last headscarf debate in France, for instance). However, it still recognizes religious groups’ rights of institutionalization. In Turkey, a nation-state based on predominantly Sunni-Turkish population, two factors seem to be most significant in setting the context: the adoption of rigid laicism as a founding ideology of the new Republic and the Lausanne Treaty of 1923, which have resulted in the official recognition of only three religious communities (Greeks, Armenians and Jews) as minorities. These two principles hinder the development of community services to be offered to Iraqi Assyro-Chaldean Christians. The weakness of institutional representation of local religious minorities in Turkey (unlike the *millet* system of Ottoman Empire which allowed a legitimate representation of religious communities) has thus a negative impact on the construction of a transnational religious field.

Notwithstanding the engaging work of Catholic networks worldwide and their attention to refugees and migrants, it needs to be stated that the Chaldean Church in Istanbul is a member of neither the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) nor the Catholic Near Eastern Welfare Association (CNEWA). The most considerable factors on this point are distrustful and precautionary state policies towards non-Muslim minorities and ‘the fear from missionary activities’ that may occur due to the potential development of such inter- and trans-national connections. The absence of reliable reception and admission policies towards asylum-seekers and migrants, as well as sceptical attitudes towards Christian minorities influence the range of social space that Iraqi Christian migrants may benefit from. While social networks established in religiously plural contexts contribute substantially to the sustenance of migrants (Hagan, 2002), such networks seem to be relatively sluggish in Turkish transit

country context. In short, the extent of the transnational religious space of Christian migrants in Turkey seems to be delimited through state regulations.

Conclusion

Based on my field research on Iraqi Christian transit migrants in Istanbul, I portrayed their migration process, with a focus on social networks. The analysis of the transit stop of Assyro-Chaldean migration in Turkey reveals the recent migratory patterns in the Middle East. Religious networks, in addition to familial ones, play a significant role in the organization of these migrations and the survival of the migrant community in the challenging temporary sojourn period in transit countries. The absence of necessary reception policies and the weakness of refugee and migrant associations increases the importance of such networks, especially religious ones which provide various services, such as legal aid, and medical or educational assistance.

This wide-ranging religious network and priests' eminent position in this web bring to mind the question whether we can attribute a transnational character to this religious social network which seems to cross over national borders. Adopting a perspective that blends micro, meso and macro levels, I reveal that there are serious limits to the expansion of transnationalism, despite the extensive role played by the Church and affiliate institutions in constructing a transnational social space in Istanbul. While the extent of religious networks has been advanced by activities of the church personnel and associated organizations such as the Caritas branch in Istanbul, the political context in Turkey seems to hamper its further spread.

ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS¹⁵

1. *Father George*¹⁶

Father George was and actually still is one of the most known figures of the Iraqi Christian community in Istanbul. He stayed in Turkey for around two years and left for Canada in the end of 2003, with the aim of working as religious personnel for the recently migrated Chaldean community; he thus departed for Canada with his work permit, a fact that increased his reputation among his compatriots.

The responsibility of Father George in Canada is not only religious leadership; he also acts as ‘the boss’ of the community in the small Canadian town. He is in charge of the communitarian sponsorship system and selects families ‘to be invited’ under the community quota, some 20-25 families every year. While he was still in Istanbul, he conducted detailed research on the families with a lower possibility of admission. He had then earned considerable social capital and admiration in the eyes of Chaldean migrants for his diligence on the details of application and admission procedures, like file numbers and form sheets. As a *transnational professional*, Father George had contacts with migrant- and refugee-related institutions as well, such as ICMC (International Catholic Migration Committee), IOM (International Organization for Migration) and of course Caritas. He was also in touch with the Australian and Canadian Consulates when he was in Istanbul. He complained about the lack of office. He said that his fellow citizens could come to his house or could see him on Sundays in the church only.

The sponsorship system in Canada enhances communitarian bonds: not single individuals but a group of five at least is necessary to sponsor certain persons or groups to be admitted as refugee.¹⁷ The state bequeaths basic social services like accommodation and employment to the community; the guarantors are obliged to provide economic support to newcomers for 3-10 years. The intriguing point in the case of Canada is that chain migration is effective also on refugee admissions. For the time being, the Chaldean community in Canada is small and the capability to sponsor is rather low, but Chaldeans gather around the church to increase their means to ‘invite’ the ones stayed behind.

The family of Father George has spread to Australia, Canada and Iraq. The pioneer migrant of his family, his eldest brother, arrived in Turkey by crossing the mountains in 1996, when he was 23. After staying a few months in Istanbul, he went to Athens, where he stayed two years and acquired refugee status for Australia. Since he obtained citizenship in Australia in 2001, he sponsored 11 people to go there and thus became quite famous. The Australian sponsorship system reinforces familial networks, since the most widespread way of entry to Australia for Iraqi Christians is ‘family migration’ quota. People who are granted citizenship or permanent residence permit acquire the right to ‘sponsor’ their relatives of the first degree who wants to reach Australia. The convergence of the legal framework in Australia with the social solidarity network of the migrants creates a system that we may call as ‘institutionalised chain migration’.

Another brother of Father George left Iraq in 1999. It was George who collected the necessary amount of money, 7,500 USD, for him to reach Athens. Actually until 2002-3, the itinerary of Athens seems to be more attractive among Iraqis. However increasing controls of Turkish authorities on the borders, as can be observed in the official statistics of apprehended foreigners (Icduygu 2003), have diminished the popularity of this route.

Before his departure, Father George had initiated an informal committee of nine people (each representing a town in Iraq) to watch over their compatriots. He was trying to convince people to pay

15 All the names are pseudonyms.

16 Interviews with Iraqi Chaldean priest in Istanbul, in October 24 and October 31, 2003.

17 (<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/index.html>).

five dollars to be utilized in cases of emergency. Even though this financial facet could not be realized due to the material difficulties of Iraqi Christian migrants, it has been quite successful in organizing people and distributing the necessary information about application procedures to newcomers. He envisaged realizing similar structures in Australia and Canada in order to collect funds for Chaldeans in need.

2. *Jaklin*¹⁸

Migration is not something new for Jaklin, who is a 24 years-old, vivacious, elaborately dressed Chaldean woman. She first moved from Baghdad to Mosul when she married Steven, her aunt's son. (Endogamy is widespread among Chaldeans, and is one of the few differences they have with Assyrians). Even though to the opposite direction, she thus acquired an experience of internal migration like many other Chaldeans in Istanbul. Despite all the difficulties they are now facing in Istanbul, Jaklin remembers her days in Mosul with aversion. Her husband, being a cook in Iraq 'did not earn enough to cover their expenses' a fact which compelled them to live with her mother-in-law. The increasing social and economic unrest pushed them to consider emigration and finally in 1998, Jaklin, Steven and her 2 year old son left Iraq with fake visas stamped on their real passports. The chief indicator in opting for legal or illegal measures to enter Turkey is the economic means of the family since a considerable amount of money was required to fulfil the necessary papers. Especially before the last war, people who came via the zone held-in-check by Kurds told that they paid an approximate amount of 2500 dollars to obtain passport and visa. Without doubt, the amount is hard to afford with respect to the economic condition of Iraq. Most of the people put every possession to sale on the account of leaving Iraq permanently without a prospect of return.

During the journey, Jaklin was pregnant with her second baby, and she later on had one more. These last two, born in Istanbul, do not have any identity papers and are thus 'officially nonexistent' due to their irregular status in Turkey. The fact that the last child has an infection in his brain worsens their situation. After various controls in the Italian Catholic Hospital, a health centre that charges lower prices for Iraqi Chaldean migrants who are directed there by Caritas, the baby was able to have a serious brain operation in a public hospital. Again Caritas and the church gave support and paid the greatest portion of the hospital expenses, some 2,000 USD, an amount certainly unaffordable for Jaklin and Steven.

Similar to other Iraqi Chaldeans in Istanbul, they initially stayed at their relatives' flat for a while, before finding a place of their own. Benefiting from his co-patriots' help, Steven found a job, of course in the informal sector. His salary, which is around 250 USD, is not sufficient for their daily expenditures; however they are privileged of not paying rent since they are dwelling in a building owned by the Syrian Orthodox Church. Though it is a run-down, very small flat, it is certainly a great material help for them. Thus Jaklin believes that Syrian Church is more generous than the Chaldean one and prefers to attend the Sunday Mass in the former church.

Jaklin's distance from the Chaldean church is also related to her uneasiness among her compatriots. She complains about the members of the Chaldean church that they look a lot at what she dresses and make insinuating remarks about her, pretending to confuse her with a Turk. As she clearly puts it: 'I am not comfortable there so I prefer Syrian church, they don't look at me strangely there'. Her unusual choice for Sunday Mass is related to her endeavour to break away from community control which is quite strong due to the Chaldeans' residential clustering in three adjacent neighbourhoods. She does not like to hang around with Iraqi women as well and frequently complains about Chaldean community in her neighbourhood: 'They gossip a lot as if I go out too much. They talk behind me that I am always wandering around. This is why I only go out now when somebody needs a translator.' Actually her spoken Turkish is exceptionally good, compared to many other Iraqi housewives, who rarely go out of their houses due to the fear of being arrested.

18 Interviews on 4.11.2003 and 13.04.2004

Having been refused twice by Australia, they are now trying to convince Steven's uncle to sponsor them under family migration category. A few years ago, having lost hope to obtain official acceptance, they resolved to use clandestine ways to reach Europe and thus contacted smugglers. On the way towards Bulgaria they were arrested by police, a factor which decreases their possibility to get an official acceptance. Jaklin is frustrated of 'getting stuck in Istanbul', though she seems quite well adapted to Turkish environment. She asserts that it is not possible for them to return to Iraq since they sold everything they had in order to collect the necessary money to migrate.

In contrast to other Iraqi Christian women, Jaklin refuses to work as a cleaning lady at the houses of the native Syrian Orthodox. She claims that 'Syrian women are stingy; they make us work a lot and they want to pay very little'. Employment in the domestic service is something new for Chaldean women who did not have any such experience back in Iraq. Except the ones from Baghdad who were employed there, most of the Iraqi women from small towns were housewives. Jaklin states that 'it was not strange for women to work in Baghdad, but in Mosul they say it is shameful, they do not let women to work in a paid job'. Ironically, there are more job opportunities for young women in Istanbul, due to the mushrooming of domestic service sector. While married Iraqi women work in daily cleaning jobs, unmarried women work as live-in housemaids and nannies. Jamal and Regina's five daughters work in Syrian Orthodox households.

3. Jamal and Regina¹⁹

I met Jamal and Regina via their daughter who was helping me as translator for some interviews. I wanted to talk to Regina especially after I learnt that she is one of the few Assyrians in Istanbul. Her regular visits on Sunday Mass caught my attention and made it easier to approach her. Despite her belonging to a minority sect within the Iraqi Christian community in Istanbul, her story was telling about the convergences in being articulated into the Chaldean Catholic network.

Jamal and Regina's testimony is also interesting because it reveals one of the few 'failed' cases, i.e. unfinished migration, of the Christian community. They have been in Istanbul since 1996 and are desperate about several 'refusals' they have received for their applications to Australia and Canada. Jamal anxiously declares that they are ready to stay in Istanbul if the government would grant them an official residence permit. This unusual statement reveals complexity of their situation. While they seem to be ready to stay in Istanbul and to accomplish their integration in socio-cultural and economic aspects (which especially children have already made a great progress by incorporating into informal job market and their almost perfect Turkish), they are also afraid of accepting to stay in Istanbul while almost all the others could reach the countries dreamt about.

Regina, a 40 year old Assyrian woman, had a quite well-off life prior to losing her first husband in a traffic accident in Iraq, just before the Gulf War. Being employed in an international company, she was worried about being accused by the Baath regime of collaborating with the Americans and thus decided to emigrate with her seven children. Her second marriage to Jamal, eight years younger and from a humble background, alleviated the perils of a passage from Iraq to Turkey for Regina and her children. Re-marriage for a woman, especially to a younger man, is quite unconventional among Christians despite the high proportion of widowed women after all those years of war.

Regina's marriage decision caused her to lose the support of her first husband's relatives as well as the relatives of her new spouse. She thus could not benefit from familial support by her relatives already settled in Australia. Her ex-husband's brothers refuse to send a family sponsorship letter because of her new marriage. In the same way, at their arrival in Istanbul in 1996, Jamal, Regina and the seven children initially stayed at a friend's place rather than at a relative's; a symbol of their exclusion from kinship networks. Many of the families I have interviewed affirmed that they have

19 First interview on 5.11.2003, followed by various occasions of smaller talks.

enjoyed financial support from their relatives in Australia, albeit irregular. In the relations between the relatives who arrived at their final destination and those who are on the way, financial assistance is exchanged mainly between closely related family members or between parties who will probably gain admission to the same country. For instance some mentioned that they had relatives in the USA yet have not taken support from them in any way. This may have to do with the strict American policy of not admitting Iraqis anymore, which decreases the possibility that migrants will meet their relatives in that country. Hence, it suggests that familial ties among Chaldean Iraqi migrants strengthen or weaken, depending upon the circumstances. Those who have managed to arrive in the West are especially mentioned in familial edifice, while the ones remaining in Iraq are recalled like a distant dream.

Jamal emphasizes the role of the Turkish Chaldean priest in protecting them from Turkish authorities, he claims that the priest takes care of some 40 families who got stuck in Istanbul for over five years. The priest has tried to obtain residence permits for these families by negotiating with Foreigners' Bureau. Regina complains about Caritas for not offering them enough assistance as 'they rather help widowed women' and they pay no attention to her since she is married now and 'incorrectly assume that she does not need help anymore'. When I ask whether this ignorance can be related to her being Assyrian, i.e. not Catholic, she refuses fervently and argues that there are no big differences between Assyrians and Chaldeans except the marriage pattern.

Actually this has not been Jamal's first attempt to emigrate. Exhausted after endless years of service at the army, he deserted and fled to Syria during the 1991 Gulf War, where he was arrested and detained for six months. After two years in a camp he lost despaired of ever getting official acceptance and he illegally crossed the Turkish border. Eventually he was arrested in Istanbul and sent back to Iraq. After having married Regina he arrived in Istanbul once more in 1996, but was returned again in 2000, when Regina's elder son, Anthony, got involved in a dispute in the street, and was knifed in his leg. Policemen arrested Regina, Jamal and Anthony in the hospital and deported them to Iraq some 20 days later. Starting all over again, they had to collect 4,000 USD to join their six children who were left alone in Istanbul.

Actually it was a difficult period for the five daughters and a son who stayed by themselves in Istanbul. Except the youngest daughter who was then 9 years old and the elder daughter who was taking care of her, all the girls (whose ages range between 13 and 19) were and are still employed as live-in domestic servant at the houses of Istanbulite Syrian Orthodox families. Earning between 200-300 USD monthly they paid the amount needed to obtain fake papers for their mother, brother and step-father.

Families who have no elder children are more needy, since it is harder to find employment for men aged over 30, considered 'too old' by Turkish employers who prefer to recruit younger people. In this sense, Regina's household is quite well-off thanks to the earnings of six children. Benefiting from the bridge built by church staff between the Iraqi Chaldean and the Turkish Christian minority, Iraqi women find employment as domestic servant at local Christian, i.e. Syrian Orthodox and Armenian, households. Although they have a possibility of earning a higher salary in the mainstream market, they prefer to work at Christian families which provide a 'relative safety' and 'familiar environment' thanks to sharing a similar religious minority identity.

Within the highly competitive informal employment market in Istanbul, Iraqi Assyro-Chaldeans try to mobilize their network contacts to be able to get a job. Iraqi Christian transit migrants have a quite isolated social milieu. Yet their main social capital based on their religious affiliation helps them to get in contact with indigenous non-Muslims of Turkey. The bridge through church staff among two networks constitutes a valuable resource which Iraqi transit migrants utilize as a survival strategy. Church employees acting as a bridge linking two social networks, help the incorporation of Chaldean Iraqis having strong internal ties to a wider social milieu through the link of Christianity. Domestic service at local non-Muslim households provides an alternative and marginal 'ethnic niche' which helps ensure the survival of the Iraqi transit migrant community in Istanbul. There are two main

employment options for Iraqi Christian women: unmarried girls predominantly work as live-in maids with only one or two days off per month. Married women inevitably decline this opportunity even though it pays better than other options and opt for daily work in confection sweatshops or daily house cleaning services again at local non-Muslim households.

This general picture should not mislead one to assume a completely positive familial environment. Regina's biggest problem is to conserve the legitimacy of her authority and control over the children who are now grown-up and weary of having such an uncertain future. Recently, the eldest daughter opposed Regina's right to collect the salaries that they earn. Jamal's constant unemployment, paired with the older daughters' complaints of having to continually pay for his expenses as well as their own longing to live a life of their own, away from the strict community control, has destabilized her supremacy at home. The communal stability which is quite solid in other transit migrant households seems to have been shaken in Regina's family, which has stayed 'too long' in Istanbul to protect long-established norms and attitudes.

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