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INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES AND IRAQI MIGRATION IN PRECONFLICT SYRIA

Abstract

During the Iraqi refugee crisis of 2007–10, international humanitarian organizations appeared for the first time in the Syrian domestic arena. These aid providers interpreted the position of Iraqi refugees in Syria according to a liberal conception of state–citizen relations that did not accord with the Syrian government's actual approach to Iraqis. Guided by this liberal frame, humanitarian organizations introduced biopolitical programs into the Syrian domestic context. Through new forms of population management, they solicited forms of behavior from Iraqis that were different from those required by Syrian state authorities. Drawing on the concept of biopower and using ethnographic material drawn from long-term research in Damascus in 2009–10, this article sheds light on an important political development in Syria shortly before the outbreak of social unrest and on the social changes that international humanitarian aid may transport.

Keywords: biopolitics; humanitarianism; migration; refugees; Syria

Scholars from a range of disciplines have recently started to consider the deeply political nature of humanitarian work. Humanitarian aid has been analyzed, for example, as an "arena" in which the outcomes of aid giving are negotiated; a "condition" that "shapes life experience over time and across space"; and a "distinct sector of security" in which international elites determine the nature and response to human insecurity.[1] With humanitarian aid corresponding so clearly to a politics of managing life, its power is frequently analyzed within a Foucauldian framework to argue, for example, that humanitarianism's logic of compassion replaces the recognition of qualified life (*bios*) with a new legitimation of bare life (*zoe*). One important question that weaves through discussions of humanitarian aid is the relationship between liberal governance and the Foucauldian concept of biopower. International relations scholars working within a Foucauldian framework understand biopower, broadly definable as a power exerted through (seemingly) nonviolent technologies of population management, to be a key aspect of liberalism. Thus, for them, biopower can partially explain the successful translation of liberal politics into a wide variety of contexts, as well as liberalism's appeal and tenacity.[2] At the same time, these scholars have challenged the assumption that the globalization of liberalism will lead to, or even increase, freedom and equality, pitting them at odds with cosmopolitan international relations scholars.[3]

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At a time when large parts of the Middle East are experiencing a rapid and unprecedented expansion of international humanitarian aid, understanding humanitarianism's political impact is highly significant. This article aims to contribute to this understanding through an analysis of international humanitarianism's entry into Syrian domestic politics during the years 2007–10. Aside from providing an empirically rich description of a fascinating political development—the sudden appearance of humanitarian politics in a country previously hostile to most forms of international aid—the article addresses two epistemological questions raised by recent scholarship on the politics of humanitarianism: whether and how the Foucauldian concept of biopower can be usefully deployed for analyzing humanitarianism; and whether there is indeed a connection between liberal politics and biopower, as claimed by Foucault and many Foucauldian scholars.[4] I argue that the biopolitical approach of international humanitarian institutions active in illiberal environments creates powerful incentives for people to adjust to liberal subjecthood, but also excludes and punishes certain identities and behaviors, limiting its appeal.

The case of Syria during 2007–10 is particularly illuminating for exploring the epistemological and practical connections between liberal conceptions of statehood and the application of biopower. Whereas neither of these played a significant role in Syrian domestic politics prior to the arrival of international aid organizations, humanitarian groups implemented programs based on a liberal understanding of state, citizen, and the relationship between them. Emerging out of the liberal conception of politics guiding aid organizations, their programs deployed biopower to govern Iraqi refugees, structure their fields of action, and shape their subjectivities. The application of biopower, aimed at intimate aspects of the lives of Iraqi refugees, was a far cry from the more laissez-fair practices of the Syrian government, which managed Iraqi migration through a very loose application of official immigration rules—as far as they even existed. By contrasting how state and nonstate organizations in preconflict Syria managed the Iraqi migrant population, I provide empirical evidence that biopower is closely connected to key liberal understandings of the relationship between statehood and citizenship. Moreover, by demonstrating how biopower was transported via a growing factor in Middle East politics—international humanitarianism—I show that Foucauldian concepts can be usefully applied, albeit in limited fashion, beyond the political context of Western Europe, for which they were originally developed.

This article is divided into three parts. In the first part, I outline the context of Iraqi migration to Syria between 2003 and 2011 and the arrival of humanitarian organizations. In the second part, I analyze the liberal understanding of state–citizen relations held by these organizations to argue that it was out of step with the social and material reality of the Syrian context. In the third part, I provide three ethnographic examples of humanitarian biopower and link them to the liberal humanitarian rationale.[5]

IRAQI MIGRATION TO SYRIA (2003–11)

Migration from Iraq to Syria has ebbed and flowed since the foundation of these two states as modern republics in 1958 and 1946, respectively.[6] Depending on relations between their Baʿthist governments at any given time, Iraq and Syria opened or closed their borders to each other's population, and, depending on the political climate, gave asylum to each other's internal political enemies, who could be used as political

bargaining chips. The number of Iraqis who arrived in Syria in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, however, was unprecedented.[7] Initially, only a small number sought escape and shelter—mostly former government figures who, fearing swift retribution, fled for Damascus. But by 2006, as violence began to engulf more and more of Iraqi society, thousands of Iraqis crossed Syria's eastern borders every month.[8]

Although the financial burden of taking up exile in Syria was lower than in other states neighboring Iraq, it was sizable enough to ensure that this option was available only to Iraqis of at least modest wealth. (Iraqis who were forced from their homes but unable to afford to join the ranks of refugees abroad had to settle in the growing, impoverished encampments of the "internally displaced" inside Iraq.) Most of the Iraqis who arrived in Syria were from urban centers, particularly Baghdad. However, they came from nearly all of the country's social, religious, and professional groups.[9] Arriving in Syria, they generally settled in religiously mixed neighborhoods and did not import sectarian violence, as some Western observers feared would happen.[10]

The Syrian government maintained an "open door" policy toward Iraqis through-out the crisis, and allowed them free movement and the ability to settle according to preference. Iraqis sought housing on the open market and were not required to live in specially constructed camps. The reasons for Syria's spontaneous and uncomplicated reception of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis can be attributed in part to a historical cosmopolitanism that has characterized Iraq and Syria since these areas were Ottoman provinces. Throughout the 20th century, Syria welcomed and rapidly integrated several waves of refugees, including Armenians, Circassians, and Chechens. As Iraqi society sank into ever crueler warfare, Iraqis uninterested in pursuing violence and sectarianism could turn to Syria as a safe haven. (Syria did, until 2005, serve as a transit country for international fighters seeking to join the Iraqi conflict, but this did not affect its internal stability).[11] Moreover, Syria's official adherence to pan-Arabism allowed Iraqis visa-free immigration and residency rights during the first years of the crisis.[12]

As a result, by 2007 certain Damascene suburbs, which had available accommoda-tion at relatively inexpensive rents, had taken on a growing Iraqi identity, with Iraqi restaurants, stores, and social clubs springing up.[13] The Iraqi dialect could be heard everywhere on the streets. While Syrians did not publicly discuss the arrival of Iraqis (or other social and political changes), they acknowledged it in private conversations, expressing mixed feelings ranging from compassion to annoyance.[14]

Meanwhile, Iraqi migration had not yet been identified as an "emergency" that merited an international response. The discursive, visual, and material practices that identified Iraqi migration as a humanitarian disaster were only just underway. In March 2007 I visited the then tiny head office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in central Damascus and had a telling conversation with its single operations officer. Referring to the lack of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Syria able to implement humanitarian aid projects, she described how one day earlier she herself had to provide help when a man approached the UNHCR office stating he had no money and would be forced sleep in one of Damascus's public parks. Shocked, the UNHCR officer immediately handed him an emergency cash donation to rent a room. Several months later, when Iraqi migration was internationally recognized as the largest humanitarian crisis in the world at that time, such individual and small-scale instances of aid were replaced by a multimillion dollar aid bureaucracy, which managed aid via hundreds of

thousands of case files and handed out goods and services based on standardized needs assessments and vulnerability categories.[15]

Within eighteen months, UNHCR had set up in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan its largest operation anywhere on the globe. The biggest single site was in Damascus, where, at a high point, UNHCR clerks administered around 250,000 Iraqi files. UNHCR Syria's budget alone exploded from US $1.4 million in 2007 to US $130 million in 2009, and continued to grow.[16] The small head office I had visited in 2007 was abandoned for a brand new, three-story office building in a modern suburb, and two large processing sites were built. The international publications machinery of humanitarian reports, advocacy mailings, concerned journalism, and TV documentaries began inundating the global public with news and images of the latest and now most important humanitarian emergency: the Iraqi refugee crisis. Iraqis in Syria had transitioned from being an internationally invisible and relatively established exile community to the latest highly mediatized human catastrophe to befall the Middle East. This shift was accompanied by a number of significant material and political changes within Syria.

Prior to this development, Iraqis had experienced governance in Syria in a manner typical of how anyone living in Syria experienced it: a combination of unfettered sovereign power with laissez-faire, which created, from a governance perspective, a highly effective and permanent state of latent fear that ensured the acquiescence of most of the population.[17] Even the relatively effective immigration bureaucracy through which Iraqis living in Syria were registered was used not to systematically exclude Iraqis from any apparently cohesive Syrian national body politic on the basis of their foreign citizenship, but rather as another tool to mobilize this effect of permanent anxiety.[18]

A striking example of how this blanket approach to population control functioned is the Syrian state's management of Iraqi migrant labor. All Iraqis crossing the Syrian border from at least 2005 onward received a prominent stamp in their passport stating they were not allowed to work. Yet, in 2009, signs of Iraqi employment abounded in several important Damascus neighborhoods, and all of my male Iraqi research participants were working or had worked at some point.[19] My Syrian landlady's brother, who owned a small orthopedic shoe factory, told me that he employed some Iraqis, adding: "the government is closing both eyes on this, because they know that Iraqis have to live *somehow*!" Importantly, the Syrian state made no public announcements about its permissive attitude toward Iraqi labor. Syrians and Iraqis simply learned over time that Iraqi employment was tolerated, though occasionally news would spread of police raids on offices or bars where Iraqis worked that resulted in arrests and deportations. In a typical example of how the Syrian government ensured its domestic sovereignty, it had created a rule, tacitly allowed for its widespread violation, and then occasionally enforced it to spread fear that the government could swoop in at any time and enforce the "law." This fear was a crucial element in the Syrian government's repertoire.[20]

As with anyone living in preuprising Syria, Iraqis were subject to the unwritten, though quickly learned, so-called "red lines" that indicate political and social taboos whose violation could result in swift retribution by government forces. These "red lines" were independent of official regulations and laws and principally concerned the absolute prohibition of public criticism against the government, the president, and his family. But as Syrian security forces, especially those connected to the secret services, were widely immune to any form of redress and could, if they chose, create trouble on a whim for all

but the well-connected, "red lines" also referred more generally to any form of behavior that could draw the attention of officials. These "red lines" applied to anyone living in Syria, regardless of citizenship, though their effect was ameliorated for passport holders of powerful countries.

Thus, while an Italian research colleague of mine, who provoked the authorities by conducting research too openly, "merely" had her laptop confiscated and was immediately deported, an Iraqi fixer who had done the same was subjected to intense interrogation, permanently prevented from leaving the country, and constantly surveilled. Balancing the effect of Syrian sovereign power could also be achieved through powerful contacts, money, business skills, or a combination thereof. Again, this principle applied to Syrians *and* foreign nationals. An Iraqi citizen with money and contacts within the Syrian government would, in all likelihood, be much more successful in Syria than a Syrian "citizen" lacking both, despite official bans on Iraqi investment and labor.

In sum, a person's relationship to the sovereign in Syria did not fundamentally depend on nationality and citizenship. These two concepts, despite the government's often bombastically nationalistic rhetoric, were only weakly recognizable in everyday life. Nevertheless, liberal actors who entered the Syrian domestic arena as part of managing the Iraqi humanitarian emergency applied their liberal understandings of politics to the Syrian context, not noticing, or choosing to ignore, the extreme contradictions that this produced. These liberal actors opened new opportunities for Iraqis in Syria, but also demanded new forms of behavior, such as confessing intimate details of one's life or accepting welfare parcels, and introduced a new form of Iraqi identity—that of the aid beneficiary—which some experienced as peculiar at best and humiliating at worst.

THE LIBERAL POLITICS OF INTERNATIONAL AID ORGANIZATIONS IN SYRIA

As has been noted elsewhere, the construction of Iraqi migration as a humanitarian emergency involved disembedding it from its historical and regional-political background.[21] The international response to Iraqi migration was heavily shaped by the activities of US advocacy organizations. Opposed to the Bush Administration and keen to highlight its severe failure to pacify Iraq, these organizations presented Iraqi flight as an embarrassment to the United States. Under pressure, the US government began funding the humanitarian aid effort and, crucially, agreed to receive tens of thousands of Iraqis annually via UNHCR's resettlement program. After other donor countries followed suit, in April 2007 UNHCR organized a large conference in Geneva on the Iraqi refugee crisis where the exceedingly high number of 4 million existing Iraqi refugees was presented to the public as if it were a fact. In the following months and years, this number, though lacking a sound basis, became a major and (due to its size) dramatic reference point in the media and in aid appeals. The Geneva conference, by attracting major international coverage, put the topic of the Iraqi refugee crisis firmly on the international humanitarian agenda.[22]

In Syria, the government's long-standing blanket refusal to allow foreign NGOs to enter the country presented UNHCR with the problem of not having any "implementing partners" with whom to collaborate in aid provision.[23] In "usual" emergency circumstances, UNHCR focuses its work on the large-scale bureaucratic undertakings of refugee registration, resettlement, and protection services, while NGOs and other UN agencies

to which UNHCR channels funds, conduct welfare provision. In Syria, UNHCR was initially forced to implement all projects directly. However, after UNHCR lobbied the Syrian government for months, Syria agreed to ease restrictions on foreign NGOs, allowing around one dozen nongovernmental aid providers to register and start operating in the country.

Syria's admittance of foreign NGOs into the country after decades of extreme suspicion of such organizations represented a watershed in Syrian politics. It indicated that the government had begun to recognize that the state was failing large sectors of Syrian society in the provisioning of services and that this situation had to be addressed. It also pointed to the government's interest in fostering a limited and controlled handover to the international aid sector to fill this gap in services.[24]

From 2008 onward, aid organizations confronted Syrian government agencies and Iraqi refugees with a different way of "doing things": their highly specific international aid "jargon," their approach to management, to finances, to recruitment, and their aid distribution were all new to the Syrian context. Most importantly in terms of my overall argument, they mobilized forms of power that were foreign to Syria by, for example, distributing welfare according to detailed assessments of individual need and vulnerability. International NGOs required compliance with internal accounting and banking rules and were closely connected to the international community of private and public donors, which in turn introduced demands for transparency, communication, and negotiation in interactions with the government.[25] By creating a parallel system of refugee management based on a *liberal* conception of politics, humanitarian agencies began to shape not just Iraqis' material conditions, but also the prevailing meaning of their situation of refuge and their position within Syria.

For their part, the Syrian authorities adapted to this parallel system. In line with their long-standing suspicion of international organizations, they initially requested that all aid provision go strictly to Iraqis, essentially attempting to wall off the Syrian population from the newly established aid sector. Gradually, however, they reversed this position to demand precisely the opposite: that health, education, and other forms of assistance be channeled through Syrian ministries in order to ensure that they would benefit both the refugee and host populations. Syrian authorities learned how to achieve closer oversight of that assistance and to channel aid money into existing and developing patronage networks. The demand to share aid with the Syrian population fitted with the international refugee aid sector's position that extending aid to host communities is desirable because it prevents jealousy and anger toward refugee populations. However, the involvement of Syrian institutions also created new forms of corruption, as UNHCR had little control over the use of funds.[26]

UNHCR sets the standard for international refugee aid, to which most, if not all, large refugee NGOs subscribe, especially as these NGOs receive large parts of their budgets through joint-funding appeals managed by UNHCR. The agency's understanding of state–citizen relations is anchored in the liberal nature of international humanitarian refugee aid, itself based on the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention. According to UNHCR and to international refugee law, every human being is naturally linked to a sovereign state.[27] States are assumed to protect and represent their national citizens, who are bound to their state in a reciprocal relationship of rights and duties. States are also expected to systematically distinguish between their citizens and foreigners, affording rights only to

the former. UNHCR explicitly supports the right of states to deport foreigners who cannot prove a valid refugee claim. Within international refugee law, a state that does not protect its citizens and systematically exclude foreigners exists only as a temporary aberration from the norm.[28] The case of Syria highlighted the mythical nature of the idea that a system of nation-states that offer special protection to their own citizens while excluding the rest gives rise to a general situation of freedom. In Syria, it was the government's *illiberal* politics that resulted in freedom for migrants of a type unthinkable in most liberal nation-states. Because national representation played only a minor role in the creation of government legitimacy in preconflict Syria, maintaining a clear distinction between foreigner and citizen was practically irrelevant in domestic politics.

Guided by their liberal understanding of politics, humanitarian organizations in Syria considered Iraqis to be excluded from and unintegratable into the Syrian body politic on the basis that Syrian law did not offer them a route to obtaining official citizenship. In response, they mobilized elaborate programs that systematically differentiated Iraqis from the wider population, establishing them as categorical outsiders within Syrian territory. Drawing on classic methods of biopower, the agencies then tried to provide Iraqis with the resources to correct this erroneous situation and enter the "good life" of productive and healthy citizenship. By looking at humanitarianism through the lens of biopower, both the normative and material aspects of its functioning become clear, making it possible to understand how humanitarian actors may exercise power over populations in parallel with sovereign state structures.

Introduced by Foucault in the 1970s, the concepts of biopower and biopolitics have been developed and extended by several decades of Foucault-inspired theorizations.[29] Biopower may be understood as a productive (rather than destructive) power that gains force not through the threat of violence, but rather through a subtle range of practices aimed at bettering people's lives according to highly normative notions of the good life (and the kind of politics that can achieve it). Biopower may be exercised, for example, via bureaucratic systems of health and education provision, through which a population's conduct is achieved, and welfare services distributed to those who conform to liberal norms of behavior. Aberrations are not violently punished, but rather fall by the wayside to become social rejects. Through such political technologies, biopower, a necessarily dispersed form of power, achieves the normalization of human conduct toward a hegemonic order.[30] Indeed, biopower's aim is the creation of a peaceful populace that is an active partner in the governance of itself, and of a stable, healthy, and productive body politic.[31] Whereas biopower describes a form of governance, its counterpart, biopolitics, may be regarded as the general political approach underpinning the application of biopower. Over the last decade, these two concepts, originally developed by Foucault to understand the evolution of state sovereignty in Western European nation-states, have been increasingly used to understand international phenomena including questions relating to air travel, customs, trade, and international grassroots activism.[32] Development aid, humanitarianism, and migration control in particular have been analyzed through this prism and understood as being at least partially based on a biopolitical rationality and techniques of biopower.[33]

As Syria had not yet been subject to the "international economic development machine" before the onset of the Iraqi refugee crisis, the country was largely unaffected by the Washington consensus discourse of how to achieve liberal prosperity.[34] It presented,

from this perspective, an untouched territory for international humanitarianism where one can clearly observe the contrast between international humanitarianism's biopolitical approach to governance and the approach of the Syrian government, as well as the deep connection between liberal assumptions about politics and the application of biopower. This contrast conveyed liberalism's strengths and attractions, which explains its tenacity and spread.[35] But it also conveyed liberalism's weaknesses and inherently unattractive elements, which limited its appeal.

HUMANITARIAN BIOPOLITICAL MANAGEMENT: EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

In this section, I outline three instances of biopower observed during ethnographic research of humanitarian aid provision to Iraqi migrants in Syria. I will first introduce two specific ethnographic observations to extrapolate the arguments made in this article, and then provide a broader discussion of UNHCR's structural features.

The first instance relates to an Iraqi family in Syria that, in 2010, was awaiting UNHCR resettlement to the United States. UNHCR resettlement is a broadly standardized process by which refugees are examined to see whether they meet certain conditions to emigrate to a third country, usually in North America or Europe. The process involves intensive scrutiny of the individual or family in question by various UNHCR committees, which conduct detailed interviews and closely examine the case file. Should the committees accept an individual or family for resettlement, the immigration authorities of the resettlement state conduct final checks and reserve the right to reject applicants.[36]

The Abu Mahmud[37] family of eight could not return to Iraq due to the hostility of the wife's relatives to her mixed Sunni–Shiʿa marriage—hostility that had surfaced with the onset of violent sectarian strife in Iraq in 2005. The family arrived in Syria in 2006; by the time I interviewed them in 2010, they had been waiting for resettlement for four years. When the family first registered with UNHCR in 2006, they were accepted for resettlement to the United States, a process comanaged in Syria by the International Organization of Migration (IOM). On reviewing the family's case, however, the IOM identified the father's heavy weight and poor general health as a problem that required delaying resettlement. Iraqis such as the Abu Mahmud family who were without relatives or friends in the United States were allocated a sponsor, such as a charity or a refugee support group, but such sponsors, receiving very little government support, were reluctant to receive Iraqis with health problems that may require expensive treatment. Thus, the resettlement process included the kind of mandatory health checks that caused the Abu Mahmud family's file to be flagged.

During one of my visits to the family's flat in Jaramana in early 2010, Abu Mahmud explained how in 2008 a doctor had conducted a resettlement health check on him. At that time, he weighed 120 kilos and was a heavy smoker. As proof of his weight, one of his daughters showed me an old photograph taken of a very round and heavy Abu Mahmud. The doctor reported to the IOM that Abu Mahmud's health was poor, which complicated the resettlement procedure and caused the previously referenced delay. In reaction to this development, Abu Mahmud adopted a healthier diet and a daily exercise routine. Within a year his health vastly improved and his weight was down. In fact, Abu Mahmud was among the skinniest men I knew in Syria. He also managed to quit smoking. In

mid-2009, Abu Mahmud returned to the same doctor, who this time issued a report that his health was fine. Yet while the path to resettlement was now seemingly cleared, the delay persisted for reasons unbeknownst to Abu Mahmud. By the time of my visit it had been eight months since the post weight-loss medical check. Both Abu Mahmud and his wife repeated how the waiting was tiring them and causing them a lot of worry.[38]

The case of Abu Mahmud highlights not just the biopolitics of resettlement, but also how and why it is connected to a liberal understanding of politics and state sovereignty. Resettlement, in humanitarian parlance one of the "durable solutions" to refugeehood, is considered a last-resort measure in situations where a refugee can neither return to her country nor integrate in the current host country. Despite all the signs of a vibrant Iraqi refugee community in Syria, UNHCR considered Iraqi integration in Syria impossible, as the country lacked a modern asylum law and did not provide Iraqis with permanent residency and a path to official citizenship. This interpretation of Syrian immigration rules ignored the fact that Syria awarded Arabs a status between that of foreigner and citizen. The ruling Syrian Baʿath party's embrace of pan-Arabism, which has largely been empty of meaning since the 1970s as a result of the pursuit of geopolitical realism, was still reflected in many immigration and residency policies that extended privileges to Arabs unavailable to other foreigners. This distinct treatment of Arabs was visible at Syria's borders and the offices of the immigration authority, where separate counters were maintained for "Syrians," "Arabs," and "foreigners." UNHCR labeled this system "unmodern" even as Iraqis enjoyed a better status within it than they would have under the "modern" immigration management system advocated by UNHCR. While modern (i.e., liberal) "citizenship" in Syria (or, indeed, in Iraq) had not guaranteed any of the benefits typically associated with the liberal conception of citizenship, from the humanitarian refugee management perspective it was the "litmus test" as to whether a person would receive governmental protection. Resettlement, as a path to citizenship in Europe or North America, was expected to eventually fit Iraqis into a permanent, reciprocal relationship of rights and duties with a protective sovereign.

This reciprocal relationship, however, was open only to those who had been carefully screened and selected. Abu Mahmud's experience was connected to the goal of allowing only at least relatively healthy people into the United States, and is indicative of modern ideas about the healthy body politic and biopolitical population management that Foucault so well described.[39] Careful humanitarian inspection of potential migrants stood in marked contrast to the Syrian government's immigration bureaucracy. Syrian authorities conducted no such intimate checks, but also left migrants to fend for themselves, offering nothing but short-term residency permits that could not be enforced anyhow. The position of Abu Mahmud's potential sponsors, that accepting an overweight man put them at risk of having to cover expensive medical services, also speaks to the spread of *neo*liberalism, in which elements of social life previously controlled by the state are increasingly subjected to market logic and risk calculations. There was no guarantee that an overweight man would become sick, or that his slimmer version would remain healthy; these were calculations based on knowledge of health statistics and cost-analyses of different ailments, similar to those regularly carried out by health insurers. Thus, Abu Mahmud's lifestyle change was clearly linked to (neo)liberal forms of state sovereignty, liberal ideas about state and nation, and techniques of biopower, upon which liberal politics are based.

The second example of a humanitarian application of biopower to Iraqi everyday life unfolded within a very small and independent American NGO called the Iraqi Student Project (ISP), which ran an education program for Iraqi highschool graduates.[40] The goal of the NGO was to find US college scholarships for these graduates to enable them to complete an advanced degree abroad. In 2010, the organization had achieved significant success, if on a small scale: around thirty young Iraqis were studying in the United States on full scholarships, most of which were attained through the significant efforts of the two NGO directors. By the time the organization had left Damascus in 2012, it had enabled nearly fifty Iraqis to study abroad, most of whom graduated.

Every year, around a dozen Iraqi participants completed a year of intensive language and academic-skills classes at the director's small apartment in Damascus. It was remarkable that the directors considered it necessary that these students, who had already been carefully preselected, needed to receive months of training to achieve an appropriate educational and behavioral standard to attend US colleges, which, after all, admitted them on the basis of their academic record and personal essays. However, experience had taught them that students needed much more than English-language training to "make it." ISP staff frequently encouraged students to express national pride as Iraqis, and even instilled it in students by placing numerous books about Iraq's rich history and maps of Iraq on display in the ISP flat. But they also displayed and discussed representations of Iraq as a place of destruction and hopelessness, with the United States appearing as a safe haven providing them the only chance to lead a meaningful life. The ISP directors were frequently cynical and critical of US politics in the Middle East, but they strongly celebrated aspects of US history and culture, such as the 1960s peace movement (which they remembered fondly) and the civil rights campaigns, and encouraged students to celebrate them too.

To mark Martin Luther King Day 2010, the directors invited everyone to watch two episodes of a TV series on nonviolent resistance as well as a video of King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The first TV episode focused on Mahatma Gandhi; the second episode covered the decision of African American activists in the United States during the 1960s to initiate various forms of nonviolent protest. Afterwards, a discussion of the films took place. The ability to participate in animated but respectful discussion was a key element of what ISP students were expected to learn in preparation for studying in the United States. What follows is part of the transcript of that discussion.

Director A: Does anyone have any comments or questions?

Student A: There is a comparison with our situation in Iraq. We need to rebuild our country together. How can you change a country by yourself alone? But if we put our hands together, that will change our country. We have Sunni, Shiʿa, Christians . . . but we are together. We have to put all this aside. We need to bring knowledge from America. After that we will be able to rebuild our country." [Director A sighs and claps her hands.]

Student B: There has to be a strategy, and planning together. These movements didn't just happen. There needed to be a national understanding—that is what they were striving fore. That is the toughest part. The endurance that they had—amazing. That was the most amazing to me.

Student C: Common in both movements was the decision not to go ahead with violence, even if they abuse you. Then they will feel that they did something worse to you and you should look them directly in the eyes.

Director A: Notice that it was women and girls AND men.

Director B: Yes. [Quoting from the video, he states:] "We will use our capacity to absorb violence to the same extent as their capacity to commit violence"—how difficult is it to do that!

Student D: Usually if someone is attacked the other will counterattack, but with nonviolence you drain the will to attack.

Director B: Gandhi is so famous, but has anybody ever heard of this guy? [The director holds up a book called *Non-Violent Soldier of Islam*.][41]

As the discussion died down, one of the directors picked up a guitar and began singing "We Shall Overcome," a famous US protest song from the civil rights era, urging everyone to join in. At one point, the director changed the chorus to: "deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall live in peace—*yā* Iraq"—thereby making an explicit connection between the nonviolent civil rights movement and contemporary Iraq.

The selection of videos and the group discussion clearly urged the Iraqi students to draw parallels between the nonviolent movements in India and the United States and the situation in Iraq; indeed, whenever the students pursued this analogy they were met with the enthusiastic approval of the directors. In fact, even a superficial political and historical analysis of these three vastly different contexts would show that such an analogy was extremely far-fetched, especially regarding the question of violent or nonviolent activism. The directors' attempt to solicit it among the students provides a snapshot of how the translation of liberal values into an illiberal context via the humanitarian aid sector works in the nitty-gritty of the everyday. In this case, education combined with real material incentives (the opportunity to study in the United States) to train students in a particular form of liberal behavior—one in which the organization's directors believed and which formed a constituent element of how domestic politics functions in the United States. Though it occurred in Syria, the ISP's training of students in liberal values stood in marked contrast with the Syrian context, where the open discussion of any form of politics, let alone different forms of protest or social engagement, were taboo and not included in the educational curriculum. In Syria, the open expression of critical opinion on Syria's politics was met not with educational and material persuasion, but with harsh violence and punishment.

The final example I will discuss is drawn from a broader analysis I conducted on the structure of aid distribution in Syria between 2007 and 2010.[42] Humanitarian welfare to Iraqis included bureaucratic processes of selection and categorization through which Iraqis became separated from Syrians and hierarchies of deservedness were established within the Iraqi population. These hierarchies included a category of Iraqis who, due to their individual profile, were rejected by aid providers as unsuitable beneficiaries. This rejection of parts of the Iraqi population created important limits to the attractiveness and expansion of liberal humanitarianism.[43]

To access aid services, Iraqis were required to register with UNHCR. Registration was the key moment when an Iraqi became known to the organization and had her claim to refugeehood checked against "vulnerability" and "exclusion" criteria. Vulnerability criteria included, for example, female-headed households, elderly or sick family members, or unaccompanied minors; exclusion criteria included, for instance, participation in war crimes, which in the Iraqi case could affect former army members and senior

participants in Sadam Husayn's regime. Registration involved highly detailed and personal interviews that could last for hours or, in extreme cases, even days.

One of my interlocutors described the interview to me as follows:

The UNHCR clerks gave us papers. On it were questions: When did you leave? Why did you leave? Were there threats or attempts at kidnappings? And so on. I was with Zayd, my son, God protect him, and we wrote all these things down. They asked whether we owned a place outside Iraq, in Europe, and asked where we live now. Where did you live in Baghdad? What did your children study? Where was it? These kinds of questions.[44]

Most interlocutors described the process as tedious but nonthreatening:

We were given an application form that you need to fill in if you want to be a refugee. On it, you have to write a story to explain your situation in Iraq and what reasons pushed you to leave. We completed all these requirements at the UNHCR office. And then, for the interview, the person asked us everything about our previous home, our past and present situations, our circumstances, what we faced in Iraq, which kinds of threats we encountered—all these things. After that the clerk gave us a paper that stated we are under the UN's protection. We renewed it after one year and they gave us a new one for two years.[45]

UNHCR's detailed interviews, in stark contrast to the Syrian immigration authorities' processing of Iraqi residency requests without any probing into personal circumstances, exemplify liberalism's "confessionary complex," as Foucault described the frequent moments when liberal subjects are asked to reveal private details to the sovereign. Following Foucault, the "confessionary complex" trains individuals not just to accept the sovereign's power to know, but also to present their existence according to the questions asked. This process limits people's focus, forcing them to concentrate on the aspects of their lives and politics about which they are asked.[46]

The situation of those not able to meet UNHCR's criteria of worthiness is illustrated by the experience of three Iraqi families that chose not to register with UNHCR because they believed—correctly—that the husbands' former role in the Iraqi army would exclude the family from benefits.[47] Although it was precisely this association with the former regime that precipitated their persecution and early flight from Iraq, these families were not offered UNHCR services. In fact, one of the men vanished on the Syria–Iraq border during a return trip to Baghdad, where he hoped to earn some money. He was likely killed by militias operating target lists of former army members.

Similarly, the vulnerability criteria according to which food parcels and monthly stipends were distributed excluded single men, a point highlighted by the situation of another interlocutor, who, after being unemployed for several months, found it impossible to pay even his inexpensive rent. He explained to me his interaction with UNHCR:

I knew that UNHCR was concerned about us Iraqis, so I went to UNHCR's office and told them that I have no place to stay and don't know where to live. I told them that I didn't have any money or work, that working was prohibited for Iraqis according to what was written in my passport. I didn't want to break the law. But the UNHCR receptionist told me that they couldn't do anything for me. So I told her: "Ok, good, give me a tent and let me live in it. I will put it somewhere where it doesn't break the law." She laughed and said that they didn't give out tents. Behind her on the wall there was a photo of a tent and in it there were refugee children, babies. The picture had the UNHCR logo on it, and I answered: "Why did you put that picture there? Can't you see what is

in that picture?" And she was surprised about that and answered: "We can't give you a tent, if we give you a tent all of Damascus will become a camp. So we can't do anything for you." After that I told her: "Ok, write that down for me on a piece of paper: we can't do anything for you. Write down that you will not offer me a place to live, that you don't offer anything." I asked her to let me meet her boss. But of course she didn't let me. And she didn't agree to write down anything, so I wrote it and asked her to give the piece of paper to her boss—but of course this did not happen. So I left. I was very sad and upset, and left without anything.[48]

The three examples raised in this section demonstrate that the biopolitical logic of humanitarianism, which translated into welfare provision only for the vulnerable and nonpolitical, was limited in its reach and attractiveness among the Iraqi migrant population.

CONCLUSION

Syria, now the theater of an increasingly complex international war, presents a domestic political environment where biopolitics has played only a small part in the maintenance of state sovereignty. Before the conflict, Syria's illiberal domestic politics allowed for the relatively smooth integration of foreigners, who were able to reside in Syria so long as they refrained from crossing the political "red lines" applicable to anyone residing in the country, regardless of nationality. During the Iraqi refugee crisis of 2005–10, this situation benefited Iraqi migrants, who were able to live, work, and integrate in Syria despite not receiving official, long-term residency permits.

Newly arriving humanitarian organizations in Syria quickly imported forms of biopower aimed at shaping intimate aspects of the lives of Iraqi refugees, who were expected to conform to the liberal ideal of the state–citizen relationship based on mutual respect and protection. Humanitarian refugee law envisages that the solution to the plight of refugees lies in restoring their link to a national sovereign state and in repairing the protective state–citizen relationship that, in the case of refugees, has broken down. In its programs, UNHCR, and the NGOs that work for it, apply international refugee law's highly normative vision of politics as if it were the material reality of their operating contexts. Humanitarian agencies do not—and cannot—recognize that protection is not an attribute of state–population relations in many parts of the world, and they overlook the possibility of state collapse and/or the complete destruction of state–population relations. Post-2003 Iraq arguably presents such a case of state collapse, which raises the question of whether many Iraqis even had a state—let alone a protective one—to which to return.

In this article, I have argued that aid organizations' mobilization of biopower can be explained by their liberal conception of politics. Further, my analysis of humanitarian biopower's unfolding in the Syrian context shows how and why aid organizations were able to create a parallel system of migration management without attracting a negative reaction by the otherwise highly controlling Syrian state institutions. Humanitarian techniques of biopower operated within intimate domains of Iraqi migrants' lives, a sphere ignored by Syrian immigration institutions so long as the population remained publically acquiescent to the political status quo. State institutions did not see humanitarian programs—targeting, for example, health or education—as competing with them for power, for the two operated on different registers.

Since 2007, the size of the humanitarian sector in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon has grown from annual budgets of several million dollars to several billion (UNHCR's funding appeal for 2014 was for US \$3.7 billion). The enormous suffering of Syrians in and around Syria has overtaken the Iraqi migration crisis as the focus of humanitarian concern. But the programs and categories through which Syrian refugees are being "managed" by aid providers, and the applied concepts of resettlement and vulnerability, are nearly identical. Several new aid technologies developed in response to the Iraqi refugee crisis, such as the use of ATM cards and mobile communications, have become "mainstream" in the Syria crisis, while new technologies are continuously being developed. Notable among these are UNHCR's use of iris scanning in the refugee registration process, geopolitical information systems to create detailed maps of refugee settlement, and the "crunching" of enormous data sets collected via large-scale surveying. The vast expansion of UNHCR-led aid in a region previously largely untouched by this form of humanitarianism is significant in terms of its geographical scale and the volume of people and resources involved. Humanitarian organizations are transporting new expert knowledge, as well as new norms of state–society relations, into the Middle East. Understanding the causes, dynamics, and transnational political effects of this expansion is an important task for scholars from a range of disciplines working on the region.

This article has shown that arriving at such an understanding requires analyzing the humanitarian aid sector's particular conception of politics, and how this politics shapes communities. Such analysis brings to light the significant differences between the region's domestic politics and the newly appearing humanitarian politics. It draws attention to the political changes that the latter may bring in its wake. How, for example, is humanitarian aid changing concepts of political responsibility, citizenship, or welfare distribution in the region? Is humanitarian action having an effect on what Jordanians or Lebanese expect from "proper" government? Is it changing how people think about their own lifestyle and their relationship to "foreigners"? While this article has highlighted the utility of the concepts of biopower and liberalism in answering such questions, it has also emphasized these concepts' limitations. Both help us to understand the politics of international aid, but they need to be expanded in analyses of social relations in illiberal environments, where authorities have comparatively less interest in and ability to manage the daily life of individuals. Close attention to the political economy of international aid can go hand in hand with theoretically informed attention to the concepts and ideas that shape social relations. The interplay between, on the one hand, the material reality of money and resources, and on the other hand, immaterial beliefs and categories, creates the everyday experience of those on the receiving end of aid and refugee resettlement programs and those involved in their management. The latter's own interests in continuing to advance these programs may also become clearer through such an analysis. Thus, in addition to migrants and host populations, researchers seeking to understand the rapid expansion and apparent persistence of international aid in the Middle East and elsewhere need to focus on administrators of donor funds at various levels, local and foreign aid managers, and host state officials.

This article has concentrated mainly on case studies in which aid agencies' biopolitical projects were attractive to Iraqi migrants, who adjusted their behavior. But it also highlighted the experiences of Iraqis whose profiles resulted in their exclusion from humanitarian welfare, causing them to fall by the wayside of humanitarian biopolitics.

While the overall aim of aid NGOs in Syria was the betterment of Iraqi migrants' lives, their biopower also resulted in the "rejecting into death" of those Iraqis who could not, or would not, have their conduct shaped in a way that suited liberal ideals.[49] Further, novel forms of behavior required from Iraqis in their encounter with aid organizations, which, unlike Syrian authorities, placed Iraqis into the position of welfare receivers and impoverished victims, evoked feelings of humiliation. The aid sector's demand to extract and record intimate aspects of Iraqis' personal suffering placed Iraqis in a position of having to (re)perform an identify of victimhood, as well as having to repeatedly relive sad and horrifying memories. *This* aspect demonstrates the limits of biopower as betterment of life and compellingly shows that the biopolitical administering of populations has inherently exclusionary and violent features.

Unsurprisingly, the violent elements of humanitarian biopower were not lost on those Iraqi migrants positioned at the receiving end, and were an important factor in limiting its appeal and thus its ability to translate into the local context. Most of my Iraqi research participants quickly and intuitively grasped the logic of power of the various actors intervening in their lives and positioned themselves accordingly. Occasionally, they tried to bargain and strategize in order to push back at the boundaries, and they frequently ridiculed the illogical and hypocritical behavior of powerful actors, including aid organizations. This article shows that the spread of liberal values is contested and limited, both on the individual and state levels, as the violent surfacing of sovereign power in the Syrian war makes clear today. Yet it also shows that despite these limits, liberal humanitarianism's enticing promise of human rights, representative government, and welfare, coupled with biopower aimed at bettering the human condition, is a powerful incentive for people in illiberal environments to adjust to liberal subjecthood.

NOTES

[1]Dorothy Hilhorst and Bram J. Jansen, "Humanitarian Space as Arena: A Perspective on the Everyday Politics of Aid," *Development and Change* 41 (2010): 1117–39; Ilana Feldman, "The Humanitarian Condition: Palestinian Refugees and the Politics of Living," *Humanity* 3 (2012): 165; Scott Watson, "The 'Human' as Referent Object? Humanitarianism as Securitization," *Security Dialogue* 42 (2011): 5.

[2]Wanda Vrasti, "Universal but Not Truly Global: Governmentality, Economic Liberalism, and the International," *Review of International Studies* 39 (2013): 49–69.

[3]David Chandler, "Critiquing Liberal Cosmopolitanism?: The Limits of the Biopolitical Approach," *International Political Sociology* 3 (2009): 53–70.

[4]For the purposes of this article, "liberal" refers to a style of governance where the sovereign power of the state to intervene in individual lives and society is effectively restricted by law, and state legitimacy is upheld by public representation and suffrage. The term *illiberal* refers to a form of rule that includes no independent legal or administrative structure to effectively limit the government's power to violently intervene in individual lives.

[5]Research for this article was carried out principally during a ten-month field visit to Damascus in 2009–10, during which I lived in the then Iraqi-dominated suburb Jaramana. Previously, I conducted several long-term stays in Damascus in 2005–7.

[6]Geraldine Chatelard, "The Politics of Population Movements in Contemporary Iraq: A Research Agenda," in *Writing the History of Iraq: Historiographical and Political Challenges*, ed. Riccardo Bocco, Jordi Tejet, and Peter Sluglett (London: Imperial College Press, 2011).

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[9]Kurdish Iraqis were an important exception. They generally fled to the quasi-autonomous northern Iraqi provinces ruled by Kurdish parties.

[10]Reinoud Leenders, "Iraqi Refugees in Syria: Causing a Spillover of the Iraqi Conflict?," *Third World Quarterly* 29 (2008): 1563–84.

[11]Salam Kawakibi, "La migration irreguliere en Syrie: les refugies Irakiens comme cas d'etude," report for the Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration, European University Institute, Florence, 2008.

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[13]Omar Dewachi, "'Between Iraq and a Hard Place': Urban Governance and Transnational Laboratories of Intervention of Displaced Iraqis in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon" (unpublished paper, 2010).

[14]Ashraf al-Khalidi, Sophia Hoffmann, and Victor Tanner, "Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic: A Field-Based Snapshot," Brookings Institution–University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement, Washington, D.C., June 2007.

[15]Sophia Hoffmann, "The Humanitarian Regime of Sovereignty: Ingos and Iraqi Migration to Syria," *Refuge* 28 (2011): 59–70.

[16]UNHCR, "Country Operations Plan 2007: Syrian Arab Republic," Damascus, Syria, 2007, accessed 5 January 2016, http://www.unhcr.org/49cb99652.html; UNHCR, "UNHCR Global Appeal 2010-2011: Syrian Arab Republic," 2009, accessed 5 January 2016, http://www.unhcr.org/4b0512649.html.

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[18]Kawakibi, "La migration irreguliere en Syrie."

[19]Ali Ali and Mohammed Kamel Dorai, "Under the Radar, but not Invisible: Iraqi Activity in Syria's Informal Economic Sector," UNHCR, Damascus, 2010.

[20]Bassam Haddad, *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012).

[21]Geraldine Chatelard, "What Visibility Conceals: Re-Embedding Refugee Migration from Iraq," in *Dispossession and Displacement: Forced Migration in the Middle East and Africa*, ed. Dawn Chatty (London: British Academy, 2009).

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[23]Senior UNHCR officer, interview with the author, Damascus, Syria, 26 October 2009.

[24]Salam Kawakibi, "What Might Have Been: A Decade of Civil Activism in Syria," *openDemocracy*, 11 March 2013, accessed 5 January 2016, https://www.opendemocracy.net/salam-kawakibi/what-might-have-been-decade-of-civil-activism-in-syria; Salam Kawakibi, "The Paradox of Government-Organised Civil Activism in Syria," in *Civil Society in Syria and Iran: Activism in Authoritarian Contexts,* ed. Paul Aarts and Francesco Cavatorta (London: Lynne Rienner, 2012).

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[31]Michel Foucault and James Faubion eds., *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 3 (New York: New Press, 2000), introduction.

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[35]Sophia Hoffmann, "The Humanitarian Regime of Sovereignty."

[36]UNHCR, "Resettlement Handbook: Department of International Protection," Geneva, Switzlerland, November 2004, accessed 5 January 2016, http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b35e0.html. UNHCR's bureaucratic apparatus may be considered the backbone of its operations and power. Recent studies of the bureaucracies of liberal and nonliberal regimes have revealed their totalistic and nonnegotiable forms of power, which contradict classic sociological analyses of how bureaucratic control functions. See, for example, Anya Bernstein, Elisabeth Mertz, Kristin Sandvik, and China Scherz, "Symposium on Bureaucracy: Ethnography of the State in Everyday Life," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 34 (2011): 6–50; Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Hadi Nicholas Deeb, George E. Marcus, and Michael Silverstein, "Directions: Studying Bureaucracies," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 34 (2011): 51–80; Ilana Feldman, *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule, 1917–1967* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); Ishan Ashutosh and Alison Mountz, "Migration Management for the Benefit of Whom? Interrogating the Work of the International Organization for Migration," *Citizenship Studies* 15 (2011): 21–38; and Alison Mountz "Where Asylum-Seekers Wait: Feminist Counter-Topographies of Sites between States," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 18 (2011): 381–99.

[37]All names of interviewees have been changed.

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[39]Ibid.

[40]The Iraq Student Project, accessed 5 January 2016, http://www.iraqistudentproject.org/.

[41]Author's participation in ISP activities in Damascus, 18 January 2010; Eknath Easwaran, *Non-violent soldier of Islam: Badshah Khan: A Man to Match His Mountains* (Tomales, Calif.: Nilgiri Press, 1999).

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[44]Iraqi family, interview with the author, Damascus, Syria, 18 February 2010.

[45]Iraqi woman, interview with the author, Damascus, Syria, 28 January 2010.

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[48]Iraqi man, interview with the author, Damascus, Syria, 14 February 2010.

[49]Fassin, "Another Politics of Life Is Possible."