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# Iraqi refugee households in Jordan: the active search for solutions

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**For Iraqi refugees in Jordan the decision to leave for Europe is very much influenced by the experience of waiting in the region.**

At the beginning of August 2015, 37 Iraqi refugee families left my neighbourhood in East Amman, Jordan, in order to travel to Europe. After years of waiting for resettlement through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) they decided to take their future into their own hands. Their former neighbours showed me their pictures on Facebook: there they are, their friends on rubber boats, arriving on the shores of Greece. European-mediated representations of refugees find their ways into the refugees' homes. The 'Mediterranean migrant crisis' is their neighbours, friends, sisters and brothers.

The media discourse and the policy responses within and beyond the European Union are warped; building higher fences

will not stop people from searching for a safe future. While Iraqi refugees in Jordan are granted protection, they are denied the right to work, and obtaining Jordanian citizenship is almost impossible. Instead they live in limbo, waiting for something to happen and at the same time actively searching for a solution elsewhere. The overarching idea is that there is no future for them in Jordan and no possibility for peace in (and hence return to) Iraq.

Unable to work, they spend much of their time in front of the television and on their smartphones. What might seem a luxury item for life in displacement is in fact essential since these digital technologies enable them to remain connected as families are dispersed. Iraqi refugee families continuously gather

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UNHCR/Florian Rainer

Iraqi refugee with book still wet from sea crossing from Turkey. Austria, September 2015. Mohammed was a doctor back in Mosul but fled with his family to Aleppo – and from there to Turkey and then to Greece. Now they are living in a volunteer-run shelter in Vienna, Austria, where they hope to seek asylum.

information about refugee policies in Europe from a variety of sources and test ‘facts’ by conversing on a daily basis with people ‘here’ and ‘there’. Iraqi refugees are active in interpreting their situation in Jordan and in strategising about their future.

The recent media attention on refugees has only heated the debate among Iraqi refugees in Jordan on whether and how to go to Europe. What is shown on news channels like Al-Jazeera is double-checked on social media. Facebook is used to check up on friends and family members who have decided to travel, but also to compare possible routes and destinations and to remain informed on shifting immigration policies of Western nation states. Issues of safety and the risks involved are considered, as pictures of people drowning are widely shared. But they also see in televised media many people successfully reaching Greece and travelling onwards.

People who were earlier discussing online how changes in UNHCR’s policy in Jordan would affect them now post to the same groups on how they managed to get to Europe by themselves after years of waiting in vain. The experience of those Iraqis who have travelled to Europe therefore feeds into the experience of those waiting for resettlement in Jordan. Among others, including the new arrivals, it creates a determination to leave

Jordan before they run out of money to travel. Because even if there are legal options to travel, waiting for the paperwork costs money, and without the right to work this proves problematic. Depending on how long they have been in Jordan, most Iraqis have depleted their savings and rely on financial support through social networks or informal employment, which can be risky.

The lack of future options in the region and the on-going strain on the UNHCR system make people feel the need to take their lives into their own hands. This might not be as orderly and smooth as European governments would like it to be but it demonstrates the capacity of displaced persons. The increase in those people arriving ‘unannounced’ in Europe is a direct result of too few resettlement slots and of a region struggling with the intake of refugees.

Forced migrants therefore feel the need to find a future elsewhere by themselves. This does not happen in isolation. Refugees in Jordan are part of a globalised world; they know what is going on in their home country and in the world and process the big media stories into their personal and intimate lives. Waiting in Jordan creates desperation which is contrasted with the images of the journey from Turkey to Greece and onwards from there. Going to Europe is regarded as dangerous but quick and relatively easy. It is a measure taken out of a lack of alternatives; the system meant to support the refugees is broken and will not be fixed by building walls.

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