Searching for Instability? Refugees and Displaced People in the Middle East

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The movements of people are a fundamental historical characteristic in the Middle East, and in the last sixty years – since the end of the Second World War, with the creation of Israel and the end of the protectorates – they have affected a considerable number of people. Moreover, the region holds the tragic record of having the greatest density of refugees in the world. A record that acquires especially notable dimensions when one considers the reduced space – basically in the Gaza area and in Jordan –which concentrates the nearly four million refugees protected by the United Nations in the region in 2007.[1] The post-invasion situation in Iraq, the hostilities between Israel and Lebanon in 2006 or some of the actions of the latter country's army confirm the importance of the phenomenon of forced migrations in the region. In general, the countries of the area have percentages of foreign population of 15%, and both in Jordan and in Lebanon and Syria more than half of this percentage corresponds to the refugee population.[2]

In general, refugees and displaced people have been considered the "collateral" victims of conflicts that needed a solution that never came; on many occasions they have been treated as a bargaining chip to reach agreements and on others a discourse of support for them has been constructed which was more formal than real. In recent years, however, it has been seen how the refugee and especially the displaced person progressively became an instrument of political instability. In their own or neighbouring state, the actors in confrontation seem to have discovered the possibilities of using refugees and displaced people as factors of destabilisation, making them into victims of a migration conceived to be forced.

Lebanon: The Recurrent Issue of Displaced People

The bombings of south Lebanon in summer 2006 are an example of this use of the refugees and displaced people, as are the attacks that the Lebanese Government began in May 2007 against the Palestinian refugee camps. In the case of the displaced Iraqis it is clear that, in addition to being individual victims and victims of the ethnic relocation, they have been exploited as factors to deepen the political instability of the country.

During the so-called "July War" (or Second Lebanese War) of summer 2006, the Israeli army forewarned the Lebanese people of their bombing raids, with the objective of allowing the civilian population to abandon the villages before being attacked. With these manoeuvres, the Israeli army limited the number of civilian casualties, while generating a notable flow of refugees and, above all, internal displaced people which extended the harshness and brutality of the conflict beyond the bombed zones. At the end of the 33 days of military intervention, around 300,000 Israelis had abandoned their homes in border territory, and the United Nations estimated that around 700,000

[1] For its complexity and limitations of space, this article consciously leaves to one side other movements of refugees and displaced people existing in the Middle East. Despite their importance and interest, the cases of Israel, Iran or Palestine are not the object of this study.

[2] Figures of refugees are always estimated, which means that, along with the refugees in camps or under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of people requiring international protection is not always known. The same happens, although in greater proportions, in the case of the displaced people, who in addition do not have the possibility of being protected by UNHCR, which increases even more their situation of defencelessness.

Lebanese had moved from their homes, seeking refuge in other areas of the country while another 200,000 Lebanese had gone to Syrian territory. The process of returning of these more than 900,000 displaced Lebanese was especially complicated and slow, as the bombings had severely affected the Lebanese infrastructures and the number of displaced people was 20% of the three and a half million Lebaneses living in the country. Although a month later, in August 2006, the United Nations observed that most of the displaced Lebanese had returned home, the truth is that this return did not happen with the same swiftness in some regions of the country as in Beirut and its surroundings. The slow return of the displaced people made clear, in any case, the need for a profound process of national reconstruction, as most of them returned to destroyed towns, agricultural lands scattered with mines, uninhabitable houses and non-existent basic services such as electricity, drinking water or medication. Moreover, specific points of south Lebanon continued to be uninhabited because of fear of unexploded cluster bombs remaining from the conflict.

With the still visible consequences of 2006, in May 2007 the attacks of the Lebanese army on the Palestinian refugee camps once again made clear the vulnerability of the displaced people and their exploitation. With the objective of weakening the Islamist group Fatah al-Islam, which was held responsible for the attacks on the nearby city of Ain Alak with its Christian majority, the camp of Nahr al-Bared (and to a lesser extent that of Ain al-Hilweh) was bombed by the Lebanese army. Until September 2007, when hostilities officially ceased, the around 30,000 Palestinian refugees residing in these camps were used to pressure Fatah al-Islam and to try to weaken the supposed support that, from the refugee camps, was given to this organisation.

Iraq: The Perpetuation of Instability

Despite being one of the most recent cases, the Lebanese displaced people and refugees are only one more piece in the complex puzzle of the forced movements of population in the Middle East. Iraq is, at present, one of the clearest examples of how the political and social instability and the survival of a generalised violence provoke forced displacements of population, and how these are consolidated as instruments precisely for deepening this instability.

The existence of internal displaced people and refugees is not, in the case of Iraq, a novelty. During Saddam Hussein's regime, in the Kurd regions of the north and in the Shiite south, the forced movements and the mass flights were usual (one only has to highlight the Anfal operations of 1987 and 1989), while the existence of Iraqi or Iranian refugees formed part of the policy of confrontation between the regimes of Iran and Iraq. But the truth is that the situation worsened considerably after the invasion of 2003. According to the United Nations, just before the military intervention led by the United States to remove the Baathist regime, in the north of Iraq there were around 800,000 people, most of them Kurds, around 100,000 Shiites, and a low number of Kurds displaced in the centre of the country, while around 600,000 people had sought refuge in neighbouring countries.

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In today's Iraq, the refugees and, mainly, the displaced people, have taken on a new and dramatic dimension. After the end of the war in 2003, many Iraqis have become victims, actively and passively, of their own government. Insecurity and defencelessness have obliged large numbers of population to move in search of safer and, in many cases, culturally similar surroundings. According to the United Nations, in November 2007, around four million Iraqi citizens had been forced to leave their homes, and the figure continued to grow with the 60,000 that, every month, felt obliged to do so, especially because of the continued violence in the regions of the centre and north of the country. Out of this huge figure, half had sought refuge in neighbouring countries (95%, while 4% had moved to Europe and the rest to North America and Australia), some of whom are establishing mechanisms to protect their borders and limit the number of refugees who enter their territories.

As indicated by the figures of the different international organisations who work in the field, the number of displaced people in Iraq almost doubled after the bombings of the Samarra Mosque in February 2006. This incident was a key turning point from where the attacks between Shiite and Sunni groups worsened, and the ethnic movements of displaced people were con-

solidated. The general trend shows that most of the Shiite population is moving from Baghdad, Anbar and Salah al Din to the southern regions of Najaf, Qadissya and Karbala, on a route that the displaced Sunnis set out on in the opposite direction. Other minority groups, such as the Christians or the Sabian/Mandaeans, are also fleeing the threats and intimidations, and many are heading to the Kurd regions of the north where the Kurd groups have autonomously established some minimum security lacked by the rest of the country.

Return, Stability and Peace

As can be seen, occasionally in the case of Lebanon and in a more structured way in the case of Iraq, in recent years it has been seen how the refugees and especially the displaced people have become involuntary actors, at the same time as victims and protagonists of the perpetuation of instability. The complicated circumstances that accompany any flow of refugees or displaced people in the Middle East takes on an especially dramatic character, as it becomes clear that the existence of these vulnerable populations is a desired result and is repeated with certain regularity.

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Government actors, actively or passively, and opposing groups seem to have discovered in the displaced people a mechanism for generating insecurity and making the reconstruction difficult, given that

their exploitation has more effect than the mortal attacks on the civilian population. The forced migrations affect a greater number of people without generating the same international condemnation that would be expressed if we were speaking of mortal victims (four million in the case of Iraq), and have some effects – of urban reconstruction but also social, economic and political – that are perpetuated beyond the peaceful resolution of the conflict. The slow process of the return of around one million citizens in Lebanon and the two million displaced people (in other words, homeless people, without guarantees of security and without access to basic services, to note a few effects) that currently exist in Iraq make clear the magnitude of a part of the humanitarian drama experienced today in the Middle East. The return of the refugees and the displaced people is a great pending challenge for the region, and is certainly the most complex to be resolved, as doing so involves bringing peace and stability to a region that, today, is still an unstable powder keg.

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