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# Revisiting Iraq: Change and Continuity in Familial Relations of Iraqi Refugees in Copenhagen

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**Abstract:** For refugees, their country of origin often provides a strong source of belonging and identity, yet many refugees can only maintain infrequent contacts with it. This article investigates how the sudden increase in relations with Iraq after Saddam Hussein's fall affected Iraqi refugee women and their families in Copenhagen, Denmark. It shows that, while renewed transnational practice in some ways allowed the women to re-create links to their relatives and their places of origin, thus affirming their Iraqi identity, it also raised questions about previous notions of relatedness and belonging and created a stronger sense of belonging in Denmark.

**Keywords:** refugees, place, belonging, relatedness

**Résumé :** pour les personnes réfugiées, leur pays d'origine constitue souvent une source importante d'appartenance et d'identité, alors que de nombreux exilés ont peine à maintenir des contacts fréquents avec leur milieu d'origine. Cet article s'intéresse à l'augmentation soudaine des relations avec l'Iraq consécutive à la chute de Saddam Hussein et à son impact sur des femmes irakiennes réfugiées à Copenhague et sur leurs familles. On y montre que, par de nouveaux échanges internationaux, ces femmes ont pu dans une certaine mesure recréer des liens avec leur parenté et leur lieu d'origine, et par là affirmer leur identité irakienne, mais que ce processus a aussi soulevé des questions quant aux notions antérieures d'appartenance et de liens familiaux, et a renforcé le sentiment d'appartenance au Danemark.

**Mots-clés :** réfugiés, lieux, appartenance, liens familiaux

## Introduction

In the experience of mobility, the family constitutes a site in which notions of continuity and belonging are continuously negotiated in relation to processes of change. For Iraqi refugees living in Copenhagen, Denmark, their family background provided them with a history and a sense of identity that grounded them in their place of origin in Iraq. Yet, during most of their stay in Denmark, they could only maintain infrequent contacts with their relatives in Iraq and they were not able to visit their previous homes. When the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq removed Saddam Hussein's regime from power in April 2003, this political transformation immensely altered their possibilities to re-establish or maintain relations with family members in their places of origin. The new situation also opened up the question of whether Iraqis living abroad would eventually be able to move back to Iraq. Many families in Copenhagen tested the viability of moving back through return visits to Iraq. On these occasions, they saw their previous homes for the first time in many years and the return visit was, in many ways, a joyous occasion. However, during these visits they also realized the changes that had occurred while they were living abroad. This led them to consider seriously where they felt they belonged and where they wanted to spend their futures.

In this article, I will investigate how the increase in transnational practices among Iraqi women and their families in Copenhagen affected women's sense of belonging to their places of origin in Iraq and where they currently live, namely Denmark.<sup>1</sup> Several studies of post-war return have shown how refugees experience a number of difficulties when they come to visit a place that used to be home. Yet, how these experiences may simultaneously reshape conceptions of social relations in the migration destination is seldom explored. My analysis is based on the claim that migrants' attachments to places are closely tied with the social relations they maintain there (cf. Olwig 2005). Therefore I will explore women's

senses of belonging through an analysis of their notions of kinship and friendship as they discuss and practice these, both in their everyday lives in Copenhagen and on their visits to Iraq. The article particularly focuses on the case of Umm Ali, an Iraqi woman who returned to visit Baghdad after 28 years' absence. I argue that, whereas renewed transnational practice in some ways allowed women to re-create links to their relatives and their places of origin, at the same time the increased contact with relatives in Iraq called into question the women's own ideas of relatedness (Carsten 2000) and belonging. Furthermore, this argument raises questions about the usefulness of distinguishing between ways of being and ways of belonging (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004) in transnational family relations.

Although the article focuses on Iraqi women, it is not primarily concerned with issues of gender. Rather, it discusses how the intersection of factors such as gender, social class, generation and religion affect notions of belonging. The analysis is based on 15 months of fieldwork (2004–05) among Arab Iraqi women and their families in Copenhagen. My interlocutors came from Baghdad and other urban areas in Iraq, and they had all completed at least a high school education. At the time of fieldwork they had lived in Denmark for between seven and 17 years and they were fairly well established there, despite the fact that many of them did not manage to find employment in Copenhagen. Instead they spent a great deal of their time taking care of the family, taking courses and re-educating themselves and participating in a number of social activities. The majority of my interlocutors were observant Shiites who took active part in Shi'a religious events in Copenhagen. Iraqi Shiites were persecuted by Saddam Hussein's regime in many ways and it is therefore not surprising that a large number of families in Copenhagen were initially very excited about the demise of the regime. My data thus reflect a period in time in which many Iraqis in Denmark were very optimistic about the future of Iraq. Saddam Hussein had just been removed, the first elections were taking place, and although there were definitely problems in Iraq, it seemed to many that the country might be on its way to a more positive future. Unfortunately, things mainly went in the opposite direction. The security situation became very unstable, living conditions deteriorated day by day and Iraqis in Copenhagen have become increasingly negative about the future of the country and the possibility of return. Their doubts about their return are, however, also influenced by the changed social relations they experienced during their visits to Iraq.

## Being and Belonging in Transnational Migration

The longing of refugees for their place of origin is a classic theme in anthropological studies of migration (Anwar 1979; Clifford 1994). Until the end of the 1980s, most studies of refugee migration focused on the assimilation and integration of refugees into new societies or on the perceived uprootedness that such movement implies (Malkki 1995). During the 1990s, this predominant focus on the experience of exile was supplemented by two emerging trends. First, studies of postwar return argued that, while refugees might long for "home" while living abroad, the actual experience of return is usually very complicated. Rather than constituting the final homecoming after a long journey, postwar return is the beginning of a new and protracted process of reintegration (Hammond 1999; Rogge 1994). The material situation has changed, society has been restructured, and personal social relations may have suffered from the long absence (see for example, Hammond 1999; Hansen 2006; Warner 1994). Moreover, the migrants themselves have changed. Within the immigration setting, it is often not apparent how life in a new social context affects migrants' ways of living. However, when they return to their former places of residence, they may well realize that not only the organization of their daily lives, but also many practices and ways of interaction have changed, thus affecting their sense of belonging to their places of origin (Grünenberg 2006; Pedersen 2003; Stefansson 2003). These studies have therefore argued that new forms of home and belonging need to be created after the return: the return is not necessarily the final step in an ongoing journey.

The other significant trend was the "transnational turn" that directed attention towards how migrants "develop and maintain multiple relations—familial, economic, social, organizational, religious and political—that span borders" (Glick Schiller et al. 1992:ix). Studies of transnational familial relations have illustrated how migrants' lives are grounded in familial networks of care and exchange, as well as relationships of obligation and expectation (see for example, Bryceson and Vuorela 2002a; Gardner 2002a; Gardner and Grillo 2002; Olwig 2007; Salih 2003). Physical absence is not necessarily the same as social absence. Some studies have even argued that transnational relations allow migrants to experience "simultaneity," that is, that their everyday lives may incorporate daily activities, routines and institutions located in both the migration destination and the place of origin (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004:1003). However, actually carrying out simultaneity across long distances can be

very difficult. It requires a lot of resources and it depends on the ability to move easily across borders. For refugees this may be nearly impossible. Finally, simultaneity can be emotionally draining (Gardner 2002a:17; Salih 2003:54). In the Iraqi case, it turned out that just as the lack of extended families abroad could be difficult, so renewing relations could question existing notions of relatedness. Rather than taking it for granted that increased transnational relations signify a corresponding increase in attachment, it is therefore necessary to investigate how more active transnational relations may affect migrants' notions of belonging to both their places of origin and places of residence.

In their frequently cited article on the transnational social field, Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (2004) point out that maintaining transnational relations does not necessarily signify a sense of belonging to one's place of origin. They therefore argue for a distinction between transnational ways of being and transnational ways of belonging. Whereas the former refer to "the actual social relations and practices that individuals engage in rather than to the identities associated with their actions," ways of belonging denote "practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group" (2004:1010). They continue:

If individuals engage in social relations and practices that cross borders as a regular feature of everyday life, then they exhibit a transnational way of being. When people explicitly recognize this and highlight the transnational elements of who they are, then they are also expressing a transnational way of belonging. [2004:1011]

Levitt and Glick Schiller's argument stresses that transnational relations have many different meanings. For instance, the maintenance of transnational relations within a family does not necessarily signify a broader sense of identification with a particular nation state or a diasporic ethnic community. However, by turning belonging into a question of conscious identification with a group, Levitt and Glick Schiller relate notions of belonging to identity and remove them from practice more generally. The question is whether social practice and belonging can be separated in this way. As the above mentioned studies of transnational family relations have shown, places are "relational" (Gardner 2002a:120), meaning that the social relations that migrants construct or maintain in a particular place will affect their sense of belonging and inclusion there. For instance, migrants' places of origin may remain important sites of belonging as long as they still maintain social relations with people living there, whereas they

may become more abstract places of identification if the centre of their social relations shifts elsewhere (Olwig 2005:189). Moreover, studies of relatedness have pointed out that notions of kin and family are continuously produced through statements and practice (Carsten 2000; Olwig 2007). The family as both a social unit and a form of identity is always in the making and close social relations thus do not exist by themselves; they require effort and reciprocity. Based on these analytical points, I suggest that Levitt and Glick Schiller's distinction is primarily applicable with reference to migrants' senses of belonging to abstract social collectivities such as nation states or diasporic communities. In contrast, on the level of families and interpersonal relations, ways of being *are* ways of belonging in the sense that social practices and ways of interaction affect individuals' notions of belonging to a family or other social groups. Notions of belonging are not just a matter of identity but are grounded in the social relations that migrants construct and maintain. This entails that a change in transnational ways of being may affect ways of belonging both positively and negatively. In the following, I will substantiate this argument by exploring the situation of Iraqi families in Denmark.

### **Transnational Relations between Denmark and Iraq**

International migration from Iraq has always been linked to the country's violent history. Before 1990, Iraqi migration was primarily directed towards other countries in the Middle East, but after the first Gulf War (1990-91) it became global in scale (Chatelard 2009). At this stage, the flight and resettlement of Iraqis were also incorporated into the international refugee system to a greater degree than before. This is exemplified by Iraqi migration to Denmark because the vast majority of Iraqis arrived in the country as refugees or through family reunification. Their immigration began at the end of the 1980s and escalated during the 1990s, until by January 2010, approximately 29,000 Iraqi refugees and their descendants were living in Denmark (StatBank Denmark 2010). They thus constitute one of the largest groups of refugees in an immigrant population that makes up only 8% of the total Danish population of approximately five million people.

During Saddam Hussein's regime, Iraqi families in Denmark did not have much contact with their relatives in Iraq. Transnational social mechanisms need vectors such as globalized information systems, the ability to transfer money and transportation systems—the lack of which meant that transnational relations could not function well from the Iraqi side (Chatelard 2002:37). Instead, they were activated from Iraq's neighbouring countries.

Migration routes were established from Jordan, Syria or Turkey once the refugee managed to leave Iraq. The status of Iraqis in Denmark as asylum-seekers and refugees played a large role in the kinds of transnational relations they could maintain. In contrast to migrants who left Iraq as, for example, academics or businessmen, refugees could not visit Iraq. Instead they could travel to neighbouring countries and see their relatives, who would come to meet them there, an option that has turned the capitals of Jordan and Syria into hubs of Iraqi migration. However, the financial strain that such journeys place on both refugees and those who stayed behind meant that this was not a practice in which all families could engage. The security situation also had a large impact. While families might have been able to write letters or phone their relatives in Iraq, they were almost certain that somebody would censor letters or eavesdrop on their phone conversations, and such communication could therefore pose a threat to the family in Iraq. The internet and other forms of electronic communication did not become commonly available until after the demise of Saddam Hussein. Finally, the majority of Iraqi refugees in Denmark who lived off welfare benefits could (and can) spare only a little money to send to their relatives. Yet, the transnational relations that *did* exist became vital for the subsistence of families within Iraq, particularly during the 1990s, when the UN imposed heavy sanctions on Iraq. Relatives sent medicine, money and clothes from abroad, and the situation for families with a transnational support network was thus much better than for those families that lacked one (Al-Ali 2007).

When the demise of Saddam Hussein's regime made it possible for Iraqis to augment their transnational connections, the transnational family became a more integrated part of everyday life in Copenhagen. Transnational practices now involve frequent phone calls, e-mails and chatting to the extent that the relatives in Iraq have internet access and stable access to electricity, the sending of remittances if households can afford it, and the exchange of videos and presents sent with people travelling to Iraq. When I asked my interlocutors about the differences in transnational relations before and after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, many people mentioned that it had become easier to speak on the phone. They were now free to speak of any topic or utter any statement, in contrast to previous years when they were always cautious with communications that could easily be overheard by the security services. Not least, the new situation also allowed families to visit Iraq. Considerations about a potential return to the country were often tested through visits, sometimes only by male heads of households, while

at other times, entire families would travel. On these visits, family members would see their relatives and their places of origin for the first time in many years.

The Iraqi case exemplifies the important point that transnational relations are not constant. Transnational processes and social relations change over time, and they may decrease, die out or, as in this case, acquire renewed vitality (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002b:8; Gardner 2002b:199). In order to examine how this affected Iraqi women's notions of belonging to both Iraq and Denmark, I will present the case of Umm Ali's visit to Baghdad. The case exemplifies the very common experiences of return among Iraqi women in Copenhagen. It also illustrates how, in different contexts, the practice of actually visiting Iraq has led to a sense of both continuity and change.

### Visiting Iraq: Umm Ali's Engagement Party

Umm Ali,<sup>2</sup> an Iraqi woman in her mid-50s, lived with her husband and her two youngest children in a housing estate in Copenhagen. Her family came to Denmark as asylum seekers in 1988 after several years of moving among different countries. Upon being granted refugee status, they lived some years in the provinces and then settled in Copenhagen, where their adult children were now living in close proximity to their parents. During their years in Denmark, the parents had maintained strong ties with Iraq. A large part of the extended family still lived there and three of the children were engaged or married to cousins from Iraq. Both Umm Ali and her husband were among the founders of different Iraqi ethnic and religious associations in Denmark, and due to her continued efforts in arranging numerous religious and social activities for Iraqi women throughout the year, Umm Ali had become a central person within the Iraqi Shi'a religious milieu in Copenhagen. Finally, the family was among the first to visit Iraq upon the demise of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. Abu Ali went for an extended period to take part in the political reconstruction of the country, while Umm Ali travelled to Baghdad for two weeks to visit relatives and celebrate the engagement of her son to one of his cousins (the daughter of Umm Ali's sister). This was Umm Ali's first visit to Iraq in 28 years. During this period, she only saw her relatives when they were able to meet in Syria or Iran.

When Umm Ali subsequently returned to Copenhagen from Iraq, some of her friends gathered in a women's club in order to celebrate her safe return. A group of women met there on a weekly basis in order to socialize and read the Qur'an together, but on this occasion it was primarily Umm Ali's acquaintances who had come to welcome her

back. To share her trip with the others, Umm Ali had brought video recordings of the engagement party in Baghdad. The party took place in the club of an "oil cultural centre," and the video showed the details of the celebrations. It showed the couple and how the bride-to-be wore several different outfits during the evening, it gave close-ups of the guests, and it documented the various events taking place: the dancing, the cutting of the cake and the offering of jewellery to the fiancée. As we were watching, women commented on the events. A woman who had been away from Iraq for 25 years summed up the general atmosphere when she sighed and said: "Look how beautifully they do it in Iraq!" At the very end of the video we saw the couple leave the building. During their brief walk from the building to the car, the video showed a glimpse of Baghdad in the background. At this point, Umm Ali rewound the film and showed the women the view of the city once more.

The screening of the video in Copenhagen shows how women perceived family relations and specific practices as linked to their place of origin. It also illustrates what Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) call a transnational way of belonging because the women clearly associate the cultural traditions in the film with their Iraqi background. The engagement celebrations in Iraq entailed aspects of life that were missing in Denmark, such as the extended family and the cultural space of particular traditions and practices. In fact, Umm Ali would not have been able to carry out the celebration in Copenhagen because the fiancée would not have obtained a visa to do so.<sup>3</sup> By celebrating the engagement in Baghdad instead of in Copenhagen, Umm Ali was thus able both to circumvent Danish immigration law and to carry out the celebration "the real way." This meant that, contrary to the way engagements happen in Denmark, where the immediate family has to rent a hall and cook all the food themselves, the party in Baghdad could be held in a public place such as the cultural centre where professional staff could organize the event and provide food. Moreover, many of the preparations and warm-up events for the engagement could take place in a large family home, whereas in Copenhagen nobody had enough room to invite that many guests to their apartment. Most importantly, "the real way" also meant that the majority of the guests were relatives. As we were watching the film, Umm Ali eagerly pointed out to us who the different guests were: "This is my sister who lives in Iran," "that's my sister in Baghdad," et cetera. More than being "Iraqi," to Umm Ali the event symbolized her being a part of the family. Celebrating together meant that ways of being family made up ways of belonging to the family and one's place of origin. In order to

explore further why the presence of relatives was particularly important, it is necessary to investigate the meanings attributed to the extended family in women's daily lives in Copenhagen.

### **Notions of Relatedness: The Extended Family**

Notions of relatedness may draw on perceptions of biology, shared blood and genes, but they may equally be constructed and maintained in practices such as mundane everyday interactions, shared housing and the fulfilling of obligations (Bodenhorn 1988:3; Carsten 2000:18,1995). Although Iraqi women associated family with both blood ties and genealogy, perhaps the most frequently mentioned aspect of relatedness in day-to-day life in Copenhagen was that involving expectations and obligations. In Iraq, as in other Middle Eastern societies, the lineage has historical importance as a form of social organization. Due to the lack of functioning state structures, kin relations have traditionally played a large role in securing livelihoods and gaining access to resources. Women's narratives of the family in Iraq often pointed out how close interrelations between family members were created through the social responsibility that was enacted in everyday social relations and practices within the extended family. In comparison, Iraqi families in Denmark consisted mainly of nuclear families. Although a significant share of immigration has taken place through family reunification, this has mainly been reunification between spouses. The majority of Iraqis in Denmark therefore have only a few relatives living nearby.

The Iraqi women felt the lack of relatives especially hard when it came to raising children. In Iraq, childcare provided a prominent sphere of life in which extended family relations gave special support. In the 1970s and 1980s, urban working mothers could draw on both state assistance such as maternity benefits, free childcare facilities and free public transport to work and school, and the support of the extended family for help with the cooking, shopping, cleaning and childcare (Al-Ali 2007:134f.).<sup>4</sup> Women who continued working after becoming mothers frequently left their children in the care of grandparents or other relatives if they did not attend a nursery (Al-Khayyat 1990:154). Relatives might also take care of children when parents had to flee the country. For instance, Nada raised her nephew for several years while her sister lived abroad, just as Maryam left her oldest son in the care of her parents when she had to flee from Iraq to Russia.

In Copenhagen, women often expressed loneliness in relation to parenthood and they had no doubt that an

extended family would have helped in bringing up the children. Although many of my interlocutors were unemployed and did not need the family to take care of children, they still missed their social support network. This became particularly obvious in relation to the experience of giving birth where women missed both the moral and practical support of relatives. For instance, 39-year-old Samira actually considered travelling to Iraq when she was due to give birth to her fourth child in 2003, despite the ongoing military invasion taking place at the time. While a birth in Denmark would have been better in terms of technical equipment and medical assistance at the hospital, she felt she needed the social support that would be given to her when she came out of hospital in Baghdad. Samira knew that in Copenhagen there would be only her husband to take care of their three other children, whereas in Iraq she would be able to rely on her mother, her sisters-in-law and even her neighbours. In the end, though, she chose to stay in Denmark due to the security risk of travelling.

Some women mentioned that in Copenhagen they felt freer to bring up their children as they wanted without the interference of relatives with more "traditional" mindsets. This hints at the fact that families not only provide care and support but may also restrict and control women's actions. Nevertheless, women's stories about the family did tend to idealize family relations. In comparison, female friends in Copenhagen were not acknowledged as particularly close. Many women saw each other frequently in the neighbourhood or at religious events, but on a number of levels, women stated that friendship relations in Copenhagen could not replace their family networks in Iraq. They frequently said to me that "friends are not like family," and they felt that they were not able to share the responsibilities and tasks of everyday life with their friends in the same way that they would have been able to with their family. When I asked them why, they told me that you cannot expect the same exchange of favours from friends that you can from family. They emphasized that you could not expect friends to help you with either everyday chores or the organization of special events such as weddings or other parties. Friends might offer their services, but they had no obligation to do so. This distinction between family and friends was also apparent in social interactions. For example, even though kinship terms in Arabic are often used as a polite way of addressing non-relatives,<sup>5</sup> friends were never idiomatically recategorized as kin.<sup>6</sup> Thus, ways of being with friends did not resemble ways of being with the family, and women suffered from the loss of their personal support networks (cf. Al-Ali 2002:86).

The descriptions above represent gendered perspectives on the family. In their narratives of migration, men and women tend to focus on different aspects of movement. Dominant male narratives of migration generally focus more on employment and economic success, whereas women dwell on the importance of the family (Gardner 2002a:22). Iraqi women's stories about the extended family were not just accounts of family relations, they were also part of how women constructed "the family" (cf. Olwig 2007:218). Being a part of the family entails certain responsibilities and expectations toward one another. While in an analytical sense, the family is continuously created, from the women's perspectives you can have certain expectations or obligations towards kin *because* they are family. This also means that the family may currently be absent, but you can still expect exchanges from relatives in the future. In comparison, friendships do not exist beforehand but arise on the basis of some forms of exchange having taken place, and this reciprocity needs to be developed and maintained before there can be future expectations. Women's perceptions of differences between family and friends thus relate to the kinds of reciprocity entailed in different relationships. The screening of Umm Ali's engagement celebration on video illustrates typical ways of talking about one's family and linking it with one's place of origin. However, as the continued investigation of Umm Ali's case will illustrate, the contradiction between idealized perceptions of the family and the more complex reality sometimes became clear to women when they engaged in the transnational practice of visiting Iraq. While doing so, women experienced the limitations in transnational relations and discovered that talking with somebody on the phone is different from actually being with them. In this regard, the practice of visiting Iraq led to both a sense of continuity and a sense of change.

### **When Family Is Not Like Friends**

In the week following the screening of the engagement video, I went to visit Umm Ali in her home for the first time. Seated in one of the large leather couches in the family's living room, I noticed that the interior decoration of the apartment showed strong ties to Iraq and to the family's Shi'a religious background. The floor was covered with Iranian-style carpets, the windows were decorated with heavy drapes, and on the wall a replica of Imam Ali's sword hung next to a large image of the Ka'ba in Mecca. While Abu Ali was watching the latest developments in Iraq on Arabic satellite television, one of the sons translated the conversation between Umm Ali and me. As we were speaking, she told me that she was convinced that she no longer wanted to return to Iraq. She

would like to visit Iraq more frequently, but during her recent visit in Iraq she had realized that she knows her friends in Copenhagen better than her family in Baghdad. She is very close to her friends, whereas her sisters have become almost like strangers to her.

Umm Ali's visit to Baghdad put her friendships in Copenhagen into perspective and showed her that she was leading a very different life than the relatives she left 28 years ago. Her large social network in Copenhagen is based on the organization of religious activities. The friends with whom Umm Ali interacts in Copenhagen constitute a group of observant Shiites. They meet regularly, sometimes in private, but more often at semi-public events at the *Husseiniya*,<sup>7</sup> at religious holidays or for the celebration of life-cycle rites such as engagements, weddings and funerals. Although many events are organized according to the religious calendar,<sup>8</sup> they also become social gatherings. Here women can create a network and meet to exchange news from Iraq, discuss their everyday troubles, laugh and share food together. It is a social context in which women negotiate their sense of belonging in relation to their sociocultural backgrounds *and* their lives as part of an ethnic minority in Copenhagen. Umm Ali has gained a central position within the religious milieu because she is the organizer of many events.

When she visited her relatives in Baghdad, Umm Ali was confronted with the fact that they had not maintained the religious dedication that has become a framework of life for her and her husband in Copenhagen. She also found that her sisters had not brought up their children with the same moral standards as she had. Whereas Umm Ali thought that she had followed her mother's way of upbringing, her sisters had slackened their demands on their own children. The young ones no longer respected their elders in the same way as before and they did not carry out religious practices in daily life. In other words, Umm Ali had brought up her children much more strictly than her relatives in Baghdad and the siblings had thus passed on different notions of proper relations between genders and generations. While this experience highlighted her difference from her siblings, it also made her question her own practices. "Did I do the right thing?" she asked me, when we were discussing bringing up children in Copenhagen.

Umm Ali's experience of a social distance from her relatives was echoed in a comment by Maryam, a 48-year-old woman who has lived in Denmark since 1992. After spending a month visiting her relatives, she said:

It's very funny. When I was in Iraq, I thought a lot about my friends here in Copenhagen. I felt like I didn't have

anything in common ... also with my siblings—I have four sisters—nothing to talk about. I felt like I didn't have anything private with them, nothing to tell about, for example, about my life. We talked more about society or economics or problems, the more general stuff, right? But I have a lot in common with my friends here. I don't know, maybe because our kids go to school, Danish schools, so we have the same ... maybe I have more in common here, something personal [laughs].

Maryam's and Umm Ali's remarks emphasize a different kind of relatedness than the one referred to when talking about the family in Denmark. They underline the importance of sharing lived experiences, of knowing about each other's everyday lives and living under the same socio-cultural conditions. In this way, the two women emphasize relations which take as their starting point shared experiences and practices. In women's narratives, these dimensions of life are associated with the family, but in practice they are now shared with other Iraqi women in Denmark. In the context of return, women's notions of relatedness also become associated with the experience of having lived abroad and sharing positions as immigrants in Danish society. Maryam specifically referred to the experience of having children attending Danish schools. All in all, other Iraqi women in Copenhagen came to assume a position that overrides the dichotomy between the categories of family and friends. The new awareness of friendship relations may, not surprisingly, impact on women's notions of belonging to Iraq and Denmark, or more precisely, Baghdad and Copenhagen. When moral ideas about relations become transferred from the place of origin to the place of residence, this creates a new moral universe in the local setting (cf. Werbner 1990:151ff.).

The description of Umm Ali's return experiences shows that Iraqi women's familial relations were affected by the experience of at least two kinds of change: one is life in the host society and the changes that the migrants themselves have gone through, while the other is the encounter with a changed society in the place of origin. Finally, factors such as gender, generation, social class and religion all played a role in women's social relations and notions of belonging. Below, I will discuss these different dimensions of women's return visits.

### **Distance in Time and Space: The Impact of Life Abroad**

For many Iraqi families in Copenhagen, their initially strong desire to return and their sense of attachment to Iraq were closely related to their situation in Denmark. Although they came from urban middle-class backgrounds in Iraq, they found that they could not acquire the same

position in Danish society. Many well-educated Iraqis could not continue their studies or careers in Denmark, but became unemployed or had to return to school. This meant former engineers, journalists and teachers taking up positions as childcare assistants, nursing assistants or cleaning staff, or else living off welfare benefits. Moreover, many families lived in areas of Copenhagen where they experienced a lot of social problems which negatively affected their sense of belonging there. Finally, as Muslims they experienced social exclusion or discrimination in Copenhagen. As in many other European countries, the presence of Islam in Danish society is highly contested. This particularly affects women, as the veil is frequently interpreted in public debates as one of the most visible signs of a chosen "otherness." All in all, the intersection of social class, ethnicity, religion and gender gave the women and their families a lower social position in Danish society than the one they had in Iraq.

This downward social mobility led many families to orient themselves towards their Iraqi background (cf. Fouron and Glick Schiller 2001; Waters 1999), and some became involved in several Iraqi cultural, religious and political associations in Copenhagen. Many of my interlocutors found that the religious milieu was the place where they could best establish a social network upon their settlement. Religious associations, and the social activities they offered, served as means of inclusion into local society (Pedersen 2009). By participating in such activities, the Iraqi refugees not only found places to use their resources and gain social recognition, they also engaged in constructing notions of Iraq. They actively became involved in "Iraqi activities" and were very conscious about transmitting proper traditions to their children. In this way, they constructed local communities referring to collective identities such as those of Iraqi refugees or Shi'a Muslims, and the imagined Iraq was a large part of their everyday lives.

However, these more abstract ways of belonging to Iraq to some extent clashed with very concrete ways of being when Iraqi women and men went to visit Iraq. On these occasions, they were confronted with changes that had occurred in their own lives. Not only were they treated as wealthy returnees who often had to pay higher prices for groceries or other purchases than their relatives, but they also noticed that they had changed habits or become unfamiliar with local customs while living abroad. Routines and habits are central to the feeling of home (Rapport and Dawson 1998), and the sense of "displacement" was very disturbing to family members. The experience of difference, for example, concerned whether or not one was accustomed to certain levels of noise or unannounced

visits from relatives and friends. Likewise, several people spoke about the different perceptions of time in Denmark and Iraq. They claimed that in Denmark people usually come at the arranged hour, whereas in Iraq the exact time is of less importance. Whereas they phrased the loose perception of time as something "Iraqi," their experiences may not necessarily be related to actual differences, but rather to their own conditions. In Copenhagen, too, visitors did not always arrive exactly on time, but in their own homes the families had a place where time spent waiting was not so significant. In Iraq, they were themselves visitors and hence did not have a comfortable place in which to wait. They were also very conscious of the many things they wanted to do and the many people they wanted to see while they were there. In other words, the perceived differences between Denmark and Iraq revealed just as much about the state of the returnees as about the place they came to. Nevertheless, although these forms of practice may appear to be rather insignificant aspects of daily life, the continued confrontation with difference proved very strenuous for visiting families. These experiences also kept underlining the ways in which the refugees had become different from relatives to whom they used to be very close. In other words, different everyday habits came to symbolize distance in time and space. Furthermore, they highlighted that even close personal relations are sensitive to change and may be difficult to maintain across both geographical and time-related distances (cf. Amit 2002:24).

### **Encounters with a Changed Society**

The changes in Iraqi society since the 1990s provided another important context for encounters between family members. Women's perceptions of family emphasized notions of continuity, but familial relations in Iraq had undergone some changes having been affected by living conditions under the dictatorship and UN sanctions against Iraq during the 1990s. There exists very little ethnographic literature from Iraq, but anthropologist Nadjé Al-Ali (2007) has described the lives of women in Iraq from 1948 to the present. According to her, the sparse resources available during the sanctions period increasingly meant that nuclear families focused on their own survival and did not share resources with their extended families, as was previously common (Al-Ali 2007:199). Al-Ali also argues that the general sense of insecurity made women less willing to leave their children with relatives or neighbours (2007:189). Finally, during the period of sanctions (1990–2003), the state economy deteriorated. Government policies supporting women's participation in the labour market (mentioned above) were suspended,



and the state's discourse shifted towards the promotion of more conservative and traditional norms and policies (Al-Ali 2007:188; Rohde 2006:195). These social changes and the corresponding diffusion of more conservative social values in society made it increasingly common for women to become housewives and not to work outside the home, thereby leaving them less dependent on relatives for child care (Al-Ali 2007:189, 201ff.). In this way, the reciprocity involved in extended family relations also changed.

At the same time, as the extended family in Iraq seems to have lost importance during this period, transnational extended family relations became a vital source of support. The lack of resources in Iraq put heavy obligations on the shoulders of relatives abroad. It is probably a general feature of migration from the South to the North that, although migrant families often live without many resources in the host society, their relatives in the place of origin tend to assume that they live fairly luxurious lives. Such assumptions about migrants' wealth entail certain expectations being placed on migrants to provide for their family either through remittances to relatives in the place of origin or by taking care of relatives abroad. Neglecting to fulfil such obligations may have consequences for the migrants' position within the family (cf. Eastmond and Åkesson 2007). As a housewife and a retired worker, Umm Ali and her husband were not rich, but they were most likely considered wealthier than their relatives in Baghdad. Their son's engagement party allowed the family to display their resources and status as emigrants and seek symbolic reintegration into their community of origin (Salih 2002:223). Yet, it also provided an occasion in which sociocultural values, economic resources and personal prestige could be contested (cf. Olwig 2002:210). I was made aware of this during a research trip to Syria, where I visited Umm Ayman, the sister of Umm Ali's husband. Visiting from Iraq was also Umm Basim, the other sister of Abu Ali, whose daughter Ibtisam is married to one of Umm Ali's older sons. The two women showed me the best of Arab hospitality, but during the day it emerged from our conversations that Umm Basim was not satisfied with Umm Ali's treatment of her daughter. She accused Umm Ali of favouring her own daughters and another daughter-in-law, who was Umm Ali's own niece (i.e., a daughter of Umm Ali's sister). For instance, Umm Ali had brought her daughters to visit Iraq and Syria, but she did not bring Ibtisam, despite the fact that the young woman felt lonely in Copenhagen and missed her mother very much. Against this background, it is not unlikely that Umm Ali was confronted with obligations and the disappointed expectations of at least some of her relatives during her visit to Baghdad. Not only had

she not lived up to her gendered responsibility of being a good mother-in-law, she had not lived up to the general moral economy of kinship, according to which migrants are responsible for taking care of their kin (cf. Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). While such expectations may have seemed very reasonable from the perspective of those who had stayed behind, from the migrants' point of view it appeared as if their brothers, sisters, uncles or cousins were marked by their lives in a suffering society and were seen as "constantly focusing on money." Access to resources and their unequal distribution thus both united and divided families.

The social changes in Iraq not only involved family relations, but also the appearance of religion in public life. Women experienced these changes very differently. While Umm Ali felt that her sisters had abandoned their religious upbringing, Maryam and her friend Amina were shocked at the degree to which religion had become part of the public sphere in Iraqi society. They both came from a Shi'a family background, but neither of them practiced their religion. In fact, during their ten to 20 years of living in Denmark, both of them had engaged in associations with specifically non-religious frameworks. Amina's memories of Baghdad in particular were focused on the days when her communist friends and relatives used to move around in short skirts with loose hair. Now she found that her relatives and all her former friends had adopted the veil or were wearing an *abaya*. Both Maryam and Amina were certain that many women had done so because they could no longer afford to have stylish hairdos or buy fancy clothes. This interpretation may very well be true in some cases (see Al-Ali 2007:204), but in other cases the veil may also signify increased religious devotion. Finally, in a context in which extended family relations are reformulated, one might argue that the religious community could function as a replacement for the traditional family. While it may be difficult to demand reciprocity from relatives, it can be still asked from God.

The divergent interpretations of the situation in Iraq brought out by Umm Ali, Amina and Maryam show that women's experiences of return were closely related to the kinds of lives they had lived abroad. For Umm Ali, religion was an important part of family life, and therefore she was disappointed with her relatives. She focused less on developments in the public sphere. Maryam and Amina, on the other hand, were used to living in countries (both Denmark and former Iraq) where religion did not play a large role in public life, and they were shocked at its prominence in contemporary Iraqi society. The three women's reservations concerning Iraqi society also exemplify a general trend among refugees who have the

paradoxical experience of returning to a familiar, yet unknown, place (Grünenberg 2006:143ff.; Warner 1994). Although these experiences are closely related to changes in society after the period of economic sanctions and the 2003 invasion, among labour migrants it is also not uncommon for a sense of identification with their current places of residence to emerge when they visit their places of origin (Mandel 1990). As I will discuss in the following section, this may also be related to the gendered positions that migrants can occupy in different societies.

### Gendered Notions of Home

During my fieldwork, Umm Ali several times emphasized what she had told me in our first interview: although she would like to visit Iraq again, she no longer wanted to return to live there. In comparison, her husband was more interested in returning to settle in Iraq. The couple's different attitudes exemplify the importance of gendered positions and possibilities in daily life. In other regional contexts too, it has been pointed out that women may have less desire to return to the place of origin than their male counterparts (Fouron and Glick Schiller 2001:559; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994:98ff.). According to Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994:99), Mexican women expected that they and their children would have better opportunities in the U.S. than in Mexico, whereas the men focused on negative job situations and their poor social position abroad. A similar situation exists in Copenhagen. Although women and men experienced a similar loss of status upon their arrival in Denmark, the loss of social position and esteem was in some cases articulated more by men than by women. This may be related to the alternative positions available to women. Whereas men could no longer live up to the gendered ideal of the male breadwinner, women remained "culturally intelligible" as mothers and caregivers (Kleist 2007:238). In our conversations, Abu Ali stressed that he was tired of living as an immigrant in Denmark. Whereas Umm Ali had focused on the making of the family home, he was frustrated by his repeated and failed attempts to become part of the Danish public sphere. He also emphasized his political interests and wanted to engage actively in Iraqi politics. During a three month visit to Iraq, he had already been involved in different political activities and wanted to return to continue these.

In contrast, Umm Ali emphasized social relations. When I once asked her whether she felt that she belonged in Copenhagen, she answered with a wholehearted yes. She feels that she belongs, first of all because her children and grandchildren are there, but secondly because she has many friends there who come from all over Iraq:

Baghdad, Kerbala, Najaf and northern Iraq. If she were to live in Baghdad, she could only maintain friendships with those living in her specific area. In Copenhagen, her group of friends is much larger and more diverse. Umm Ali's attitude shows that her notions of belonging are tied to the close personal relations she maintains in Copenhagen: her children, grandchildren and friends. In addition, she has a high social standing within the circles of observing Shi'a Muslim Iraqis. Although she could be considered part of the lower class in Copenhagen, the status and recognition that she receives within the Iraqi milieu makes up for her low social position in society generally. In Iraq, she would not immediately be able to achieve the same social standing, even if her general position in society might be improved.

As Hondagneu-Sotelo points out, the respective desires to return or to stay remain "expressed preferences" (1994:100), and it is not possible to conclude whether families will eventually return on the basis of their current statements. However, several other women stated that they would not be able to return to Iraq because their children had been raised in Denmark and wanted to remain there. Whereas the adult generation had grown up in Iraq and found it "natural" to return, their children were very aware that their lives were rooted in Denmark. Nevertheless, it should not be taken for granted that the second generation was less attached to Iraq than their parents (Levitt 2009). Umm Ali's 21-year-old son, an engineering student, was highly affected by his visit to Iraq. Although he did not want to live there, he felt it was his duty to return for a limited period in order to apply his skills and contribute to the rebuilding of the Iraqi state. In contrast, his 27-year-old sister did not feel she had any ties to the country at all and just wanted to stay in Denmark. Whereas her brother was young, had no obligations and was ready to invest part of his future in Iraq, she was more concerned with creating a stable life for her family in Denmark. Generational background thus intersected with gender positions and affected attitudes towards return. All in all, the increased contact with relatives in Iraq provided family members with an opportunity to strengthen their ties with their family's place of origin, but it also questioned their sense of belonging there, just as it highlighted their attachment to Danish society. While never being a question of either-or, their notions of belonging to different places became practised and reiterated at different times and in different situations.

### Conclusion

Umm Ali's experiences highlight the complex processes of identification and belonging that become visible for

family members alongside the increase in transnational relations. This case also shows how ways of being and ways of belonging (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004) overlap within a transnational social field of family relations. Notions of identity and belonging come into being or disappear through the practices enacted in family and friendship relations. As illustrated by the engagement video, in the Danish setting the extended family represents a mode of relatedness defined by lineage and shared obligations that are absent in Denmark. As shown in Umm Ali's personal story, the importance of the place where she currently lives then becomes clear when she is visiting Iraq. Her experiences in Iraq actually point to the degree to which she has become "localized" in Denmark. She has engaged in the construction and maintenance of a religious identity and practices that have not had the same relevance for her sisters in Baghdad. In this way, Umm Ali's expression of belonging in Copenhagen elucidates the intertwining of ways of being and ways of belonging within family relations. It further highlights a problem in the public debate about the lives of immigrants in Denmark as well as in other European countries. Whereas immigrants or refugees are often represented in public discourses as maintaining foreign ways of living, in their own experiences, Iraqi women are living a life specifically related to the Danish context. Their social positions, cultural activities and daily habits are shaped by the contexts of their everyday lives.

While numerous studies have argued that migrants' returns or visits affect their social relations in the place of origin, how these may simultaneously reshape conceptions of social relations in the migration destination is seldom discussed. In this article I have shown that when changes occur in social relations within a transnational social field, migrants' relations to all places in that field are affected. Umm Ali's return visit had an impact on her personal networks in both her country of origin and her current place of living. She viewed her friendship relations in Copenhagen in a different light after her visit to Iraq and Copenhagen gained new meaning as the place in which she wished to spend her future. The case also shows that the renewal of transnational relations may serve to give the current place of living a more permanent status than it had when the possibility of return to Iraq was not present (cf. Koser 2002). The differences encountered between the imagined Iraq and the real society do, in some instances, lead families to give up the idea of return and replace it with an intention to visit frequently. This social dimension of post-war reconstruction plays a role in migrants' decisions to return, but this is difficult to resolve through policies. Yet, it seriously questions the policies of

many European politicians who argue that refugees should return "home" once conflicts in the place of origin have ended. They imagine a static home to which the refugees are then assumed automatically to belong. This article has shown that home does not exist independently of the people who make it up. In other words, politicians might be able to send people out of the country of asylum, but they cannot send them "home." Indeed, Iraqi refugees may have become more attached to their place of residence than others will ever acknowledge.

Umm Ali's family relations have been redefined, but they have not become insignificant. To a certain extent, her friendship relations in Copenhagen have taken on the role that family relations used to have. While the ideology of family may imply that friends can never become family, in practice the two are not dichotomous. The categories of "friends" and "family" are two modes of relatedness that, in effect, overlap and in this way they appear as two ends of a continuum. Iraqi women in Copenhagen develop notions of relatedness that are rooted in shared activities and life experiences rather than kinship ties. What long-term implications this may have for the family as a mode of relatedness is a question that still has to be answered. It may be that friends will come to take over the role of relatives and that notions of what the family entails will be redefined. Or, it may be that, as Iraqi families in Denmark grow and add new generations, the extended family will re-emerge and regain its previous role as a network of support and belonging. Finally, it may also be that, if the situation in Iraq improves, transnational relations between relatives will become firmer and contact with them even more frequent. Such renewed interaction may make it possible to reconstruct relationships that draw on both notions of kinship and the sharing of everyday life experiences.

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## Notes

- 1 The article focuses only on transnational relations with relatives in Iraq. I will not include relations with relatives or friends living in other European countries, although they may also play an important role in people's lives. However, they do not affect the interrelation between social relations and place that I wish to discuss here.
- 2 *Umm* is the colloquial Arabic word for mother, and *abu* is the word for father. When a couple have children, in many areas it is common that they are no longer called by their first names. Instead, they are referred to as "mother of" and "father of." *Umm Ali* thus means mother of Ali, (her oldest son). All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.
- 3 This is due to "the 24-year rule" in Danish legislation, which does not allow family reunification if one of the spouses in a marriage is younger than 24 years. The law has been implemented with the stated purpose of preventing forced marriages among immigrants who bring spouses from the family's place of origin.
- 4 During this period, the Iraqi state implemented policies on maternity benefits, free childcare and public transport in order to bring women into the labour force.
- 5 For example, a polite way of addressing an older person is to call her "aunt," while a person of the same age may be addressed "sister."
- 6 Werbner describes how this takes place among Pakistani migrants in Britain (1999:28).
- 7 A *husseiniya* is a religious school and place of meeting.
- 8 The popular Shi'a religious calendar contains more than 30 events that practicing Shi'a Muslims may choose to celebrate annually.

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