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Abstract of paper to be presented at the conference.

For details of the conference programme go to www.iraqistudies.org

Speaker: Giorgio Heinrich Neidhardt (Independent Scholar), concet1@hotmail.com

Title: The process of settling Iraqi refugees in Syria

Abstract:

This study is based on research in the field conducted in 2007, on a three-month internship in UNHCR in Damascus. The people interviewed were Iraqi asylum-seekers and representatives of some of the institutions involved (UNHCR officials, personnel in NGO's, embassy employees and political representatives). Other data has been drawn from statistics from the few surveys conducted to date. The paper analyses two aspects which characterise the settlement of Iraqi refugees in Syria after the war of 2003. The first concerns the initial patterns of Iraqi displacement. A second part then examines how the ethnic and religious affiliation of the refugees has - so far - not influenced the composition of the diasporic spaces in Damascus. One of my conclusions is that the process of settlement in the country of first asylum is not characterised by strong divisions based on ethnic origin or religion. Iraqi refugees - Sunni and Shiite Muslims as well as Christians - share an urban origin and their residential concentrations in this country of first asylum strengthens the national character of diasporic spaces, which is reinforced by the hostility of the Syrian state and the local population. However, the increasing importance of assistance provided by some non-governmental organisations of a religious nature, together with the fragile nature of international protection, might undermine the equality in the provision of assistance to Iraqi refugees in Syria and may yet lead Iraqi refugees to stress their religious and/or ethnic ties and to fragment their communities, which will probably in turn affect the composition of diasporic spaces in countries of second asylum.