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Abstract of paper to be presented at the conference.

For details of the conference programme go to [www.iraqistudies.org](http://www.iraqistudies.org)

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**Title:** Constructing and deconstructing 'Iraqi refugees'

**Abstract:**

In Jordan and Syria, humanitarian programmes aimed at Iraqi refugees have had a limited impact and the number of beneficiaries has remained strikingly low compared to the scale of funding allocated by international donors; this despite the fact that practitioners are increasingly adopting community-based approaches and outreach strategies to overcome what they have identified as a 'fear factor' preventing vulnerable Iraqis to approach assistance providers. This paper will argue that the approach of refugee and relief agencies dealing with the Iraqi 'refugee crisis' in neighbouring countries begs to be analysed critically both from a policy perspective and from a sociological viewpoint to understand the inadequacy of humanitarian interventions. On the one hand, injunctions from donors, competition for visibility and funds, the political agendas of host countries in the region and of pressure groups in the West, particularly in the USA, drive humanitarian agendas on the ground. On the other hand, framing the current wave of out migration from Iraq exclusively as a 'refugee crisis', and recurrently measuring its scale by comparison with the historical exodus of the Palestinians, construct an image of the Iraqi 'refugee' by analogy with contexts that are very different in nature. This construct in turn shapes the policies of host states and actors in the humanitarian field. Practitioners in international organisations and NGOs are bound by their apprehension of the crisis as limited in time and space whereas the post-2003 wave is embedded in trends that predate the current war in Iraq and that had already taken a global scope. Modes of operation are imported from other crisis settings that bear little relevance to the context in Iraq and neighbouring countries, while turn-over and lack of regional experience of agency staff prevent accumulation of knowledge and hamper continuity in programming. Normative, objectifying and state-centered definitions of refugee fail to discriminate between various categories of Iraqi exiles, in particular between the large number who possess the social and educational capital for self-help and self-protection and individuals who are in situation of extreme insecurity, or to understand the perspective of those Iraqis who do not conceive of themselves as refugees in need of institutional assistance, want to remain active agents of their own livelihoods and migration, and are often connected to social-support networks that span state boundaries.